Abstract

This thesis has set out to understand what is happening when impro is practised as a performance form and ask whether impro is a subversive performance practice at odds with the dominant order as described by Foucault. The research questions are whether or not performance that is improvised in the moment can be seen as 'other' to authored or devised theatre practices in the same way that woman can be seen as 'other' to the male norm. This practice-led-research has isolated and analysed themes emerging from the practice of impro using methods of action research and grounded theory applied to data collected from interviews with female impro practitioners as well as the researcher's own experiences of practising impro. The resulting themes that have been discovered are those of marginality, playfulness and communality. Victor Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of the liminal, the ludic and communitas have been mapped onto these themes and the phrase 'liminal ludic communitas' has been developed to refer to the feelings of well-being that are generated when performers practice impro. The research has discovered that impro, paradoxically, both subverts and asserts the dominant order. The form of impro, whereby performances are co-created playfully in the space and time of the present without authorship or artefact, subverts the dominant order of production and consumption whilst at the same time the character identities and stories that form the content of the improvisations tend to assert the dominant order through cliché and stereotype.

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Declaration and Copyright Statement

No portion of the work referred to in the Thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

I confirm that this Thesis is entirely my own work

Dedication

For my three boys; Aaron, Eli and Dahlan. You can do anything you set your mind to if you work hard and stay committed especially during the really hard parts when it feels impossible.

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Chapter One Introduction

'Power is threatened by what it permits' (Schostak & Schostak, 2008, 189)

1.1 Research Statement

As I set out to embark upon this PhD research my areas of concern were around themes of marginality, women and comedy. As a grounded theory based practice-led-research the practice that has emerged through the process of researching has been that of impro and the Improvathon (an epic, improvised soap opera format that is performed over several days without stopping for more than a short break). I began with an idea of creating my own comedy work as a solo female performer, informed by my background in dance and performance (for a more detailed description of my experience see Chapter Five – 5.2), however, I soon discovered that I wanted a communal experience in performance practice rather than a solo one. At the same time I was searching for a freedom of expression in the moment and this led me to focus the practice-led-research on impro, a practice that I had some limited experience of prior to embarking on the PhD research, but, one that I had dismissed as 'a bit of fun' thereby accepting the marginal status of the practice. I realised that my assumption was that impro is too easy, it is too much fun, it does not have to be worked at in the same way as when devising performance. The practice-led-research process led me to look at impro in more depth and with more criticality. The questions that began to emerge were; Why is it so much fun to improvise with other people? Why does practising impro make me feel so good and so exhilarated? What am I (are we) achieving when we practise this form of performance? Does what I am (we are) achieving have any value in a paradigm of production and consumption? And why did I initially dismiss this practice in the context of the norms of performance that I had inherited through my experiences to date? My motivations for the project arose through the practice-led-research and led me to move beyond the initial ideas around creating my own solo comedy performance and exploring the marginality of women in comedy. The end result is a project of much more originality that explores the uniqueness of the experience of making performances up in the moment and in collaboration with others (impro) and doing this for long durations in an episodic soap-opera format (the Improvathon). Researching this performance form has led me to question my assumptions about impro itself and discover that whilst in theory it looks to offer freedom from the constraints of other pre-determined performance forms, in practice, the extent to which participants have absorbed and internalised dominant cultural norms limits the freedom of expression on the improvised stage. These limits are placed upon the self and imposed upon others and the lived experience of the female improviser is where this can be seen clearly.

This research will use a methodology of action research, phenomenology and grounded theory to examine the specifically gendered, lived experience of participating in

impro for female improvisers. The case studies are a selection of female improvisers. I also include my own practice with impro, generally, and there is an emerging emphasis on the particular context of the Improvathon. The aim of the thesis is to use this original research to explore, critique and reflect upon my suspicion that the practice of impro can be said to radically disrupt the dominant order and is indeed a marginal, subversive practice of subjugated knowledge. This suspicion has emerged through my thinking at the intersection of my background in academic research into performance practice and gender, and my experience of practising improvised performance. In this thesis 'dominant order' refers not only to the western patriarchal hegemony but also to the western theatrical cultural and economic hegemony. For the purposes of this research impro is defined as a live performance in which players create characters, scenes and stories in front of an audience who are sometimes asked to contribute suggestions that the improvisers incorporate into their playing. This particular tradition of impro is often comedic in content and can elicit laughter, but also has the potential to be moving and thought provoking and does not set out to 'be funny'. The comedy is incidental. I am not implying that funny, moving and thought provoking are mutually exclusive as they can exist in the same space and time and often do in improvised performance. I have thought very carefully about the naming of the practice and decided to use the term 'impro'. I am using this term because Keith Johnstone's first published book was called *Impro* (1989) and because this seems to be the more commonly used term in the UK context. Also, in her blog, *Impro Blog Spot* (2010), Patti Stiles uses the term impro and the writing in this blog will be entered into the data set for analysis. I have chosen not to use the term 'improv' as this seems to be in more common use in the US context associated with Del Close[1] whose improvisational techniques are not being studied here. I have also chosen not to use the terms 'comedy improv' or 'comedy improvisation' because I feel this is more apt terminology for the practice that stand-up comics use in panel shows such as *QI* (TalkBack Thames) and *Eight Out of Ten Cats* (Zeppotron) and does not best describe the practice of improvised **storytelling** that is of concern to this thesis. The term 'comedy improv' places too much emphasis on the comedic aspects and too much emphasis on 'getting the laugh' from the audience. In the context of the practice examined here, laughter is but one reaction the audience might have and is certainly not to be sought by the players. I will also avoid the term 'improvisation' to refer to the particular practice that I am exploring as the breadth of this term does not exclude dance improvisation, music improvisation or improvisation as a theatre training or devising tool. Each of these practices has its own specific contexts which are outside of the remit of this research. However, as I do, of course, refer to some of these broader contexts at points in the thesis, I will use the term 'improvisation' in those instances to distinguish. On occasion I will use the term 'improvisation' when I want to talk more generally about the action itself. Similarly, I will of course use the adjective 'improvised', the noun

[1] Co-author with Charna Halpern of Truth in Comedy (1993) and director of Second City an improvisational theatre in Chicago.

'improviser' and the verb 'improvising' rather than inventing new words such as 'improed', 'improer' or 'improing'.

In this research I am investigating whether the techniques of impro as defined and practised in the twentieth century by, majorly, Keith Johnstone (1989, 1999), and Ken Campbell (Michael Coveney, 2011) contain attributes that engender well-being in 'liminal ludic communitas'. This is a phrase I am developing in this research project by merging Victor Turner's notions of liminality, the ludic and communitas (1987, 1988) and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque (1984). I am asking whether these attributes have been marginalised by the western patriarchal hegemony through a specific set of historical processes that have led to individuation, hierarchy and the creeping commodification of aspects of communal life. During the practice-led-research process, this theme of 'liminal ludic communitas' developed out of a paper I gave at a meeting of the Winchester University Working Group *Arts as Wellbeing* This was a practice-led demonstration on the practice of impro in relation to notions of jouissant communitas (see Appendix One). This formed a bridge between my inkling that feelings of well-being were engendered during the practice of improvising and a theory that might be used to support this assertion.

The investigation is conducted through a methodology of action research, phenomenology and grounded theory, taking as my research subjects: myself, as a practising improviser, and three different groups of improvising women who have improvised together. The data will be gathered through interview and self-interview as well as my subjects' and my own impro experiences generally and with a subsequent focus on the Improvathon, an event that is a durational episodic improvised format. In addition to this the impro-themed blog written by Patti Stiles will also be entered as raw data along with the chapter from *Something Like Drug; An Unauthorised Oral History or Theatresports* (1995) entitled 'He Said, She Said; Women in Theatresports' which is a collection of interviews with improvisers from Johnstone's Canadian theatre company, Loose Moose, focussing on the female experience of improvisation. The rationale for choosing female improvisers will be examined in detail in the chapter on the female performer (Chapter Three) as well as a mention in the Methodology (Chapter Four) which explores the methods available and the methods used to examine the raw data. I aim to explore the reasons for impro's marginal relationship to the theatre and its position as 'almost-theatre' (Guay, 2010) and relate this to the historically marginal position of women to men or the patriarchy. Is there a connection between woman as 'other' and impro as 'almost-theatre'? Does this play out in the female experience of impro? Does impro as 'other' of theatre hold a potency for subversion in the same way that woman as 'other' has subverted the patriarchy? Or does impro merely mirror the power structures of the wider theatrical and cultural context? I have articulated the term impro, above, to make distinct the particular cultural forms of improvised performance that I am dealing with here. In the chapter, *The Players* (Chapter Five) I will delineate precisely what I mean by this through articulating

historical and contemporary practice contexts. As stated, this demarcation serves to exclude other improvised cultural forms that have to do with music, dance and theatre training and devising methods. The borders between these forms are, in practice, indistinct and bleed into each other; cross-fertilising and lending ideas to each other.

1.2 The Frame of the Research

In Radical Research (2008), John and Jill Schostak state;

> Radical research in social contexts implies a radical politics because it raises questions that make the powerful feel uncomfortable, even threatened. What makes this research radical is the political dimension, it suggests the possible overthrow of a previously stable or at least dominant order of ways of knowing, thinking, believing, acting.
>
> (2008, 1)

In this statement on the nature of radical research Schostak and Schostak are clearly drawing on a Foucauldian frame to define what makes research radical.

In his definition of 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1980, 81) Foucault describes the two definitions of subjugated knowledge. The first is historical and the second is lived experience. Firstly, 'the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematisation' (Foucault, 1980, 81). In this research this definition manifests in Mikhail Bakhtin's examination of carnival (1984), Kathleen McGill's thesis that extemporisation in the *Commedia Dell'Arte* arrived at the same historical moment that women took to the *Commedia* stage (1991) and, in the historical and contextual situation of impro as defined by Johnstone's and Campbell's improvisational practice in relation to the western theatrical canon. This relationality could be considered as an opposition; the quality of 'fixity' with 'fluidity' (other [dualistic] hierarchies that are related to the current research are those of 'process' and 'product', 'form' and 'content', 'chaos' and 'order' as well as that of 'male' and 'female' all of which, I seek to prove, are thrown into question by the practice of impro). However, it is not a clear-cut opposition; in the case of Johnstone's work, for example, the tension between historical contents and formal systematisation becomes manifest within impro itself because Johnstone tends to set out his way of 'doing' impro as a formal system, albeit an emergent one, through publishing books full of guidance and games and designing or licensing formats (in the US impro tradition (improv) Del Close and Viola Spolin (see page 127) have also done this, Campbell, curiously, did not formalise his practice before his death in 2010). Naming methods that emerge from the practice of impro bestows authorship (for example Del Close's particular long form format was named the *Harold*) and loci of power. The danger is that schools of impro become fixed as a method, which seems to be in contrast to the fluid 'essence' of impro. The unfixable nature of the embodied 'now-ness' inherent in the practice of impro is at odds with this attempted formalisation and Foucault's proposed study and critique of the ensuing tension between chaos and order 'allows us to rediscover the

ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematising thought is designed to mask' (Foucault, 1980, 82). This notion will contribute to the research into liminality and the extent to which the practice and performance of impro disrupts, reflects (ironically or not) or maintains the dominant order of things. Why are performers driven to practise the 'almost-theatre' of impro when they could be practising their art within the legitimate scripted or devised theatre contexts? Why are these practitioners passionate about performances that cannot be authored, owned or kept in any meaningful way? Why engage in performance activity that has no enduring power of cultural legacy and little economic power or reward – a marginal performance art?

The Foucauldian notion that power produces knowledge means that subjugated knowledges are the knowledges that power does not permit and so are marginalised. This is the frame for the notion of 'otherness' in this research. The 'other' is at odds with the dominant knowledges, produced by power, and Foucault understands this notion of power to be complex in that the state apparatuses (education, media, military, religion) function not just at the meta-level (which can be identified as overtly oppressive) but more often insinuate power/knowledge at the subtle micro-level of daily life in order that individuals 'self-police' according to the covert requirements of the dominant knowledges (Foucault, 1980, 55-62). This self-policing as revealed by the lived experience of female improvisers will be explored in this thesis to help gauge impro's curious relation to the dominant theatrical hegemony in both form and content.

The second definition of subjugated knowledge that Foucault presents, lived experience, consists of a 'whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition' (Foucault, 1980, 82). He goes on to say that 'it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work' (Foucault, 1980, 82). It could be said then that one of the outcomes of the use of the method of narrative inquiry in this research could be to make 'visible' the female lived experience of participating in impro. Female knowledge has, historically, been a subjugated knowledge in the realm of the 'other', especially the expression of female experience (Butler, 1990; Braidotti, 1994; Boyce-Tillman, 2007; Ettinger, 2006). Applying a methodology of action research and grounded theory to the recording and analysis of the stories women tell of their embodied experience of improvising could make 'visible' those subjugated knowledges that Foucault describes. These can then be used to perform a critique of the position, philosophy and purpose of impro within the western performance canon that reflects on wider structures of power; political, social, cultural and economic. This is highly pertinent in the light of Kathleen McGill's research into the female origins of improvisation in the *Commedia dell'Arte* (see pages 20 and 123). In other words, this research aims to articulate a gendered genealogy of impro. Foucault defines genealogy as 'the

union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today' (Foucault, 1980, 83). I agree with Brad Fortier that illuminating the mechanisms of improvised performance 'can tell us much about the driving social and cultural forces behind collaboration and the collective construction of reality' (Fortier, 2010, i). In other words, impro is a curious cultural artefact in which is reflected and revealed gender power structures, cultural power structures and the power structure of centre and margin associated with the western patriarchal hegemony.

1.3 Existing Academic Research

Here I survey and summarise existing academic research into the broadest definition of improvisation. This literature is distinct from the more common 'how to' guides of impro that list games and work through practice methodologies. There is very little published academic research into improvisation. *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts Since 1945* (Dean, 1997) and *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Peters, 2009) are two. Both of these texts explore political, social and ontological paradigms for Improvisation. *Long-Form Improvisation; Collaboration, Comedy and Communion* (Fortier, 2010) is an ethnographic study by an anthropologist (and improviser) of performers and audiences examining collaboration and communitas. This is the closest text I have found to my own research and was published three years into my research process. Fortier and I are now in communication, part of burgeoning, global research community into improvisation which is highly emergent as I write.

Canadian Theatre Review recently published a volume devoted to improvisation (2010). In the introductory article, Knowles summarises the themes of the articles as;

> Unstructured, unconsidered, or hurried improvisation in the classroom, the theatre, the jazz ensemble, or the world tends to reproduce the clichéd, the stereotypical, or the hegemonic. Improvisation threatens to function as the unfiltered "common sense" of spontaneous action, a vacuum that ideology rushes to fill. Many of the contributors to this issue, however, celebrate the liberatory potential of improvising outside of the box [...]. It is doubtlessly true that the capacity to adapt to whatever is thrown at you can come in handy. But as T.L. Cowan here reminds us (via Amy Sehan), the notion of pure improvisational spontaneity is a myth, and, I would argue, a dangerous one. Left to our own devices, our "spontaneous" actions tend to be culturally affirmative.
>
> (Knowles, 2010, 3)

He also refers to the 'wish to subvert the entrepreneurial individualism of neoliberalism nevertheless needs to function in the (on the one hand) difficult, power-inflected and (on the other hand) stimulating improvisatory realm of the social, where "community" is constantly negotiated, neither taken for granted nor sedimented' (Knowles, 2010, 4) and 'the use of experimentation and playfulness in breaking down barriers and building a functioning, if sometimes fraught social realm' (Knowles, 2010, 4). Here Knowles identifies the paradoxical nature of impro,

Brianne Edge, a UK-based academic and practising improviser, has had a paper in *Comedy Studies* that focuses specifically on the televised impro form; *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (Channel 4/Hat Trick) which is asking whether impro can ever really work on TV (2010). She attempts to define what can be included as impro on TV; short form, long form drama, comedy panel shows and asks if there will ever be an uncut version of impro that shows, unmediated by producers and editors, the reality of what is produced during an improvisation.

A survey of PhD theses awarded at British universities whose abstracts are available to view on *theses.com* reveals a dearth of scholarship on the specific intersection of gender and improvisation. There is, in fact, a distinct dearth of scholarship on improvisation generally and very little research that I have found that explores the specific area of 'impro' that I have defined above. This is perhaps because of the form's inability to be pinned down leaving no artefacts. If performance forms are potentially ephemeral then impro is ultimately ephemeral, resulting as it does in no script, product or artefact other than the moment of performed improvisation itself – 'you had to be there' – nothing remains to be studied unless a video recording is made; this, however, like video recordings of all performances, is no substitute for the liveness of the event itself. This is especially the case for improvised performance; I have watched recordings of performances I have been in or at and, in a way that does not happen so much with scripted or devised performance, the recording loses much of the spontaneity apparent. The live audience appreciates so much more of the event than the viewer of a video. Crucially, the communal creation in the moment is hard to capture on screen except in the case of the highly successful show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* as Edge has identified.

Despite these characteristics, there was evidence of some PhD research into impro. C. C. O'Neill, in 1991, submitted a PhD to the University of Exeter entitled *Structure and Spontaneity: Improvisation in Theatre and Education* which seeks to examine how the negotiation between theatrical form and spontaneous creation creates a 'valid theatre experience that evokes dramatic worlds' (O'Neill, 1991). O'Neill defines improvisation, examines the problems associated with spontaneous production of drama, proposes solutions, and argues for the inclusion of specific structural devices from theatre in the practice of improvisation in order to create in the improvisation experience 'the coherence and complexity of a satisfactory theatre event while remaining an essentially spontaneous dramatic encounter' (O'Neill, 1991). There is no focus on comedic performance or gender in this thesis, but the notion of a paradox between structure and chaos accords with the basic ambiguity of successful impro which I will examine here. Also, the form of impro that I will explore in more detail later, the Improvathon, goes some way to solving the problem of dramatic structure that O'Neill identifies through creating an episodic soap opera structure that is held together by an improvising director **and** the cast, in complicity.

Yagi's thesis, *Towards a Definition of Performance Improvisation* (Warwick, 1999) similarly identifies the dualism between performance (theatrical structure) and improvisation (spontaneity/chaos) and allies this with the Cartesian mind/body split and asks how, in improvisation, the body and mind negotiate with and deviate from traditions and conventions (Yagi, 1999). This is similar to the questions I will be asking about how, as an improviser, I can possibly create characters that are not internally policed by my own cultural and gendered 'norms' and, therefore, create narratives that are not clichés but 'scenes that matter'. Again, Yagi, does not focus on impro specifically or discuss gender in improvisation.

There is much more research into women and performance generally, for example; E. E. Striff's thesis, *Without a Net: Dangerous Women in Contemporary Feminist Theatre and Performance* (Cardiff, 1997) is looking at the female grotesque by combining Kristeva's notion of the abject, Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque and materialist feminist film and performance theory in the analysis of various forms of female public enactment. Her argument is that grotesque imagery invites the spectator to question the limitations of the trope of 'femininity' (Striff, 1997). From this survey it seems that while some research has been conducted into impro at PhD level and much has been conducted into women performing, little, if any, research has been done on the intersection of contemporary female experience of impro in relation to hegemonies.

It is necessary to touch on a couple of references to musical improvisation which are obliquely relevant to the research due to some of the parallels they draw. Firstly, Michael David Székely, in *Thresholds: Jazz, Improvisation, Heterogeneity, and Politics in Postmodernity* (2008) connects Postmodernity, improvisation and liminality in his study of the variety of jazz forms since be-bop. He exemplifies these forms as demonstrating the possibilities of musical postmodernity to be politically relevant (Székely, 2008, 29-30); for example, in the ability of improvised music to return the site of production and distribution to the musician and he compares this situation to the medieval troubadour thereby implicitly connecting post-modernism and improvisation with the medieval carnival (Székely, 2008, 30). Using the example of 'free improvisation', a particular musical form that is engaged with, in the light of a variety of philosophical discourses, in Gary Peter's book *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009), Székely states; 'regardless of its economic failure, could it be that the disruption of a repetitive hierarchy is itself nevertheless something of a lasting political success' (Székely, 2008, 30). In other words the hitherto increasing success (mainstreaming) of jazz musical practices is interrupted by the 'failure' of 'free improvisation' but that this was a political success in that the form more readily 'thrive[d] on localizability and communality. In fact one could argue that

free jazz survives precisely because it thrives in a localised, yet flexible, milieu' (Székely, 2008, 31). Thus 'free improvisation' interrupts and democratises the official jazz canon. A parallel could be drawn with impro – despite relative economic and cultural visibility 'failure', impro localises theatre and potentially communalises it. Later in the paper Székely draws the distinction between 'non idiomatic' and 'idiomatic' music and calls for an understanding that while 'non-idiomatic' music might appear to offer a more highly valued sense of freedom and spontaneity, in fact 'idiomatic' music can also undeniably create and sustain a variety of possibilities, conflicts, resolutions, extensions and improvisational sensibilities for performers and listeners' (Székely, 2008, 34) here he is touching upon the tension between chaos and order. The idiom places some order on the spontaneous improvisation that might have more possibilities for exploration than improvisation that is completely unanchored in any recognisable form. Similarly, the art of impro in the theatrical context is to find the possibilities and spontaneity within the order of the form. Székely cites a Miles Davis album as evidence for the possibility of a liminal 'freedom' found through playing with different recognisable jazz and musical elements (Székely, 2008, 34). He establishes jazz's perceived impoverished position in relation to the classical music ideal and relates this directly to its use of improvisation but then asks why does/should improvised jazz need to assert its 'musicality, complexity, technique, style and design' (Székely, 2008, 39) and its ability to work in a place of spontaneity, mystery and passion in order to be legitimised in a western cultural hierarchy (Székely, 2008, 39), thereby throwing into question the desire to be legitimate which can be echoed in impro. In other words, seeking legitimacy is liable to remove the very qualities that give the form its uniqueness. He quotes Sara Ramshaw as declaring the paradox that jazz improvisation must be both stable subject and 'otherness' at the same time (Székely, 2008, 39) thus invoking the ambiguity and equivocal position of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. This ambiguity challenges the Cartesian notion of duality, either/or, and promotes instead a heterogeneous approach to cultural artefacts. The remainder of the paper deals at some length with reading jazz through the deconstructive lenses of several postmodern thinkers including Derrida, Barthes and Lyotard (Székely, 2008, 38-49). It is unnecessary to go into detail about this section of the paper here, but Derrida's contribution to philosophical thought around the notion of improvisation are examined at the end of this chapter (see page 25). In situating jazz improvisation as oppositional to stable classical culture and then problematising that position Székely critiques the practice and concludes that the production and reception of jazz needs to be subjected to 'schizoanalysis' a concept that 'uses schizophrenia as a model for the way in which our experience can be discontinuous, fragmented, decentered, varied [...] all are composers – organisers, rythmatists, hearers – and all are improvisers' (Székely, 2008, 49).

The next paper on musical improvisation is specifically focussed on the gendered experience of female participants. In *Women and the 'Kraakgeluiden': The Participation of Women Improvisers in the Dutch Electronic Music Scene* (2004), Helen Metzelaar utilises a methodology of narrative inquiry through interviews to ask why there seems to be a lack of involvement of practising female improvisers in the Dutch electronic music scene – a ratio of five men to one woman (Metzelaar, 2004, 200). The article explores various issues that Metzelaar has identified as being factors in this mismatch in involvement in improvisation between the genders, though she acknowledges that her results are a rather reductive assessment and that the issues are more complex in reality (Metzelaar, 2004, 205, 206). The fact that her results come from the lived experience of women that she has spoken to in interviews does point to the fact that while some of her results may seem essentialist or simplistic they are still a reality in the lives of the women she has spoken to. The factors she has identified are; firstly that the domination of men in the field of electroacoustic improvisation reinforces the stereotype that it is a 'man's field' (Metzelaar, 2004, 200); secondly the difference in methods of communication of the genders means women are often left out of arranged gigs and so have less opportunities to work with mixed gender groups and are, therefore, marginalised within the scene (Metzelaar, 2004, 200-201); thirdly, male musicians have traditionally been supported by an 'old boys' network that inadvertently works to exclude women (Metzelaar, 2004, 202); fourthly, both genders have associated music technology with masculinity (Metzelaar, 2004, 202). Metzelaar also identifies the difference in style between the genders when it comes to improvising mainly stemming from a female bent towards collaboration and a male tendency towards competition within performance itself (Metzelaar, 2004, 202-203). This difference in style is echoed in the narrative research that forms the data of this thesis. There are three quotes that accord with my experience in impro which raise interesting parallels between Metzelaar's study and this research into the gendered experience of practising impro; 'women improvisers did not often set in with new high-energy ideas. They were less [...] likely to push their own ideas and be more supportive of the other musicians' (Metzelaar, 2004, 203); 'the two male musicians took the lead, while the two female musicians were more interested in finding ways to enhance the ensemble sound' (Metzelaar, 2004, 203); 'women seem to think about the consequences of their improvisation for the rest of the group' (Metzelaar, 2004, 203). Evidence of these tendencies emerge in the self-interview and some of the other interviews and this supports my proposal that one of the central principles of impro, 'yes-and', or the principle of communal creation (communitas) is a feminine trope. As the balance of gender in the impro group that I was working with during the practice-led-research period has swung from a ratio of eight men to two women, to seven men to four women, the emphasis on slower, more collaborative work has begun in training if not yet so much in performance. Metzelaar's account is necessarily reductive and should not be

dismissed for making some quite essentialist claims about gender differences. She acknowledges that these differences seem to emerge early in childhood (Metzelaar, 2004, 205) and it is not really in the remit of her paper to ask whether these tendencies are inherent or learned (natural or performative) and later in the current research Judith Butler's ideas on this problem will be reviewed. For now, though, it is vital to remember that Metzelaar's paper has emerged from interviews and lived female experience, as has this research, so that for the women who are working within the Dutch electroacoustic scene who were interviewed, these experiences are very real, though that does not account for the possibility that there are women within that scene and other improvisation scenes who have very different experiences of gender difference. The same proviso can be applied to the narrative inquiry conducted for this research.

Further to gender differences within the improvised music scene is the research Yolanda Covington-Ward conducts in her paper *South Bronx Performances: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Hip-hop and Black Girls' Musical Play* (2006). This musical play is a combination of rhymes, cheers and physicality, improvised, developed and performed among pre-teen and teen black girls on the street and in the playground in the Bronx. Covington-Ward's thesis is that these rhymes, cheers and improvisations, a form of play that is termed 'body musicking' (Covington-Ward, 2006, 119), have been a direct influence on mainstream, commercial and overwhelmingly male, hip-hop music (Covington-Ward, 2006, 119). She traces some rap lyrics directly back to rhymes and cheers she recalls from her own childhood and discusses how they have gone from being used as an expression of unruly femininity (Covington-Ward, 2006, 122) to being used by the male rappers in the context of misogynistic lyrics and attitudes (Covington-Ward, 2006, 132). Since this 'body musicking' uses a trained (on the playground) format within which to then extemporise, this study is relevant to the current research and especially the fact that (much like the improvising women of the *Commedia dell'Arte* as researched by Kathleen McGill – see pages 20 and 123) this female unruliness has inspired and then been assimilated into a male dominated culture.

Lesa Lockford and Ronald J. Pelias, in a similar fashion to Covington-Ward, are interested in what is happening bodily when actors improvise; they term this 'bodily poeticising' which has echoes with 'body musicking' in the sense of asking 'What are the bodily sites of knowledge?' In *Bodily Poeticising in Theatrical Improvisation: A Typology of Performative Knowledge* (2004) Lockford and Pelias set out to identify the performative knowledge accessed by various forms of improvisation (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 431). These forms are defined by them as; the necessary result of a dropped line during a scripted performance, as a performance form in itself, as a devising tool and as a directorial tool that

enables actors to access a scripted scene in a new way (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 431). They argue that these improvisatory occurrences emerge from the performative/embodied knowledge of the performer cognitively, physically, somatically and affectively (what could be categorised as subjugated knowledges in the Foucauldian frame) and that this is a way of explaining how improvising performers make the choices that they make. Lockford and Pelias correctly state that the majority of scholarship within the area of improvisation focusses on the skills that performers use to improvise (i.e. Johnstone and Spolin's 'how to' guides), they accept these works as foundational to the subject (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 432) and add to the scholarship by defining an epistemology of improvised performance as inscribed upon and made through the body – hence 'bodily poeticising' (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 432-3). Their typology of performative knowledge has the categories of communication, playfulness, sedimentation, sensuality and vulnerability (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 433 & 441). They touch upon the balance necessary between order and chaos, or system and spontaneity, necessary to create meaning through improvisation (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 435) and they propose that their typology can allow trainers, performers and directors to better understand what is occurring when improvisation appears to go wrong as well as when it is successful (Lockford and Pelias, 2004, 440). Their typology is potentially useful as an analytical tool for the research material gathered from the narrative inquiry in this research into the female experience of impro.

In the paper *Reading the Valley: Performance as a Rhetoric of Dimension* (2006) Kathleen McGill examines the performance of nature as improvisatory. Using a cross-disciplinary methodology that combines performance studies, rhetoric and ethnography with ecology studies (McGill, 2006, 391) McGill takes as a case study her experience as a participatory audience (McGill, 2006, 397) of a particular valley that she regularly walks. She sees the experience as a liminal one in Victor Turner's sense of the concept (McGill, 2006, 391) and the relationships and ecology of the valley as an improvised performance (McGill, 2006, 393) and the valley itself as a theatre where the poetics are oral and fluid, in constant flux, not written and fixed (McGill, 2006, 401). She examines and defines 'performance' through Richard Schechner's theories of performative practice such as 'selective inattention' whereby a view of the periphery or the greater whole of the performance is made possible through zoning out the focal detail of the performance, or, practising a not too intense concentration (McGill, 2006, 398). She concludes 'connecting a science increasingly focussed on probable event and a rhetoric re-centered on occasion, performance reads and enacts the liminal, which is to say, the emergence of space/time in a dynamic play of improvisation, a threshold of the chthonic' (McGill, 2006, 402). This liminal space/time will be articulated in relation to the current research later in the thesis.

In *The Rhetoric of Cinematic Improvisation* (1980) Virginia Wexman highlights how little critical attention has been paid to improvisation in film (Wexman, 1980, 29). In the case of cinema there is a clearly visible and analysable product but the extent to which improvisation is used as a performance technique of film acting is not very well documented by filmmakers (Wexman, 1980, 29). The technique of improvising is used because it gives directors in a very technical and non-immediate form the chance to access a sense of discovery from the unpredictable (Wexman, 1980, 29). In this article Wexman identifies two types of effects of the use of improvisation on performance that predate the advent of reality television and Channel Four's *Big Brother* (Endemol) and other similarly unscripted programmes. These are; documentary realism, i.e. non-actors behaving normally or trained actors acting very skilfully and theatrical realism i.e. an interruption of the integrity of the filmic world being created by the actors revealing the artifice of the performance through their improvisations (Wexman, 1980, 29), or a combination of these two effects (Wexman, 1980, 30). Wexman asserts that these effects enrich the art of cinema by harnessing the spontaneous abilities of the performers (Wexman, 1980, 30) but also that this practice can cause alienation if the future audience is not considered during the creation process (Wexman, 1980, 30). She differentiates between two types of improvisation; private (which is a training tool) and public (which considers its audience and takes skill) (Wexman, 1980, 30). Improvisation on the stage is inherently public according to Wexman because of the visceral presence of the audience but 'movies [...] lack this active, ongoing relationship with the audience' (Wexman, 1980, 30) and can potentially lapse into incoherent private improvisation. In the case of improvised performance on film, the director has to be an 'objective, disciplining force' in order to shape and guide the actor's spontaneous creations. Wexman believes directors 'represent the audience' (Wexman, 1980, 32). This is yet another example in the literature on improvisation where the author identifies the paradox between order and chaos that is ever present as a mediation within the practice of improvising. Wexman briefly explores the notion of textual indeterminacy, invoking Jacques Derrida's theories and the creation of meaning akin to Roland Barthes' 'writerly reading' asking that improvisation avoids 'lapsing into the confusion that would be created by a morass of possible meanings which could lead anywhere' (Wexman, 1980, 34). The need in improvisation to negotiate the tension between narrative structure and chance is best exemplified in the training of improvisers to tell a story one word at a time. Two or more improvisers tell a story by adding one word in turn to the linear narrative (Johnstone, 1989, 130-138). There are two skills being taught here; the ability to create coherent logical stories in complicity with others that follow the rules of language, punctuation and grammar so that they are comprehensible to the other players and the observers *and* the ability to cope with offers from the other players that may appear aleatory because they have emerged from

someone else's mind with no prior warning. This crucially important game that has a foundational importance in impro training illustrates the negotiation between order and chaos that is a feature of improvised performance. While Wexman does not mention word-at-a-time-story in her article she understands 'the importance of placing improvisation in the context of a cogent narrative' (Wexman, 1980, 34);

> Films that employ a great deal of improvisation are more dependent on a clearly defined narrative structure than are more traditional productions; for the lifelike sense of the unexpected that titillates audiences during moments of improvisation must be tempered by an awareness of predictability, a sense of intelligible form that underlies the vagaries of spontaneity.
>
> (Wexman, 1980, 35)

As exemplars of Wexman's thesis, she gives two case studies, the films *Celine et Julie vont en Bateau* (Jacques Rivette, 1974) and *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975). *Celine et Julie* is, according to Wexman, self-indulgent, too long and the improvisatory nature of the film suffers from a relativity of meaning that renders it confusing and incomprehensible (Wexman, 1980, 36-37). Conversely, *Nashville* has a disciplined and purposeful use of improvisation that enhances the narrative with spontaneity (Wexman, 1980, 38). Wexman's paper predates the recent trend for films that utilise improvised scenes to tell a predetermined narrative such as those by the director Judd Apatow. Apatow casts from the school of improvisers that trained in Del Close's techniques of impro at Second City. Many actors that trained with Close have gone on to have highly successful Hollywood careers. While this thesis acknowledges Close's contribution to the field of improvisation and his legacy the focus will be on Keith Johnstone and Ken Campbell's contributions to the field.

Interestingly there is a small body of work examining the historical female improviser in the context of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, performance and the unruly medieval and renaissance female subject (McGill, Zemon Davis, Radulescu, Glenn, Cough, Rosenthal, Griffin, Tylus, Vickery Bareford, MacNeil). The two most relevant sources for this study are Kathleen McGill's field defining-study *Women and Performance: The Development of Improvisation by the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte* (1991) and Domnica Radulescu's *Caterina's Colombina: The Birth of a Female Trickster in Seventeenth-Century France* (2008). McGill's study is an exploration into what affected the shift from written to oral culture on the stages of the *Commedia* in the sixteenth century (McGill, 1991, 59). She establishes that this shift occurred concurrently with the appearance of women on the stage and the reason for this was that 'women's culture was overwhelmingly oral' (McGill, 1991, 59). This, she claims is considerably significant to theatrical and cultural history, for if women so dramatically influenced the performance practice of the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the *Commedia* in turn influenced the

development of western theatrical practice then 'insofar as the *Commedia* is archetypically defined in terms of its improvisatory techniques, restoring attribution of those techniques to their proper source in a performative effect of women's first presence on the stage profoundly rewrites the history of women's role in the creation of western culture' (McGill, 1991, 60). McGill asserts that these women were feted for their poetic abilities in extemporisation, embodied most famously in the person of Isabella Andreini (McGill, 1991, 63-65), and that their 'highly collaborative methodology [...] refused to enact difference in oppositional terms; instead, difference became multiple, inclusive and highly adaptive' (McGill, 1991, 69). McGill attributes the great success, fame and ubiquitousness of the *Commedia* to this methodology of improvised comedic performance (McGill, 1991, 69). The fact that the women's contribution was both collaborative (creating complicity) in form and subverting the norms of gendered hierarchical binary in content is a fascinating proposal that will be returned to later in the thesis.

Radulescu's frame of research is situated a century later and focusses on another female figure of the Commedia, Caterina Biancolleli, who she credits with developing the stock character of Colombina – the female trickster – a character that embodies 'transgressive humour, subversive performance and improvisational comedy' (Radelescu, 2008, 88) and takes the previous century's development of improvised comedy to a new 'level of emancipation in which the female protagonist negotiates gender, stage presence, and disguise in order to achieve personal fulfilment despite the obstacles of patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles' (Radelescu, 2008, 88). Radulescu's thesis is, crucially, that the evidence is that Caterina created the character of Colombina herself, therefore, invading the public stage with a self-authored unruly female figure in a comedic/improvised context and that this was a profoundly emancipatory act. She concludes that since the golden age of Commedia, women have increasingly become interpreters of roles written for them by male playwrights (Radelescu, 2008, 112). She writes; 'the role of Columbina is like the false dawn of women's emancipation, like a cry signalling a loss of freedom looming in the near distance, though simultaneously it is a celebration of freedom before the backlash' (Radelescu, 2008, 112). Radelescu asserts that, by taking ownership of the comedic techniques Caterina had at hand, she achieved what Frances Gray has urged women writers and performers to do in her book *Women and Laughter* (1994): 'grab language, and to fly with it and through laughter to show their authority over it' (Gray, 1994, 13). This thesis seeks to explore the battle female improvisers have before them in order to do this by examining the stories selected female improvisers tell of their lived experience of improvising with both genders.

In summary, the existing range of literature that covers the intersections of improvisation, performance and female experience in the broadest possible senses seems to place impro as 'other' to the legitimate form that it is improvising in. There has been an emphasis on the need for an order/chaos balance, highlighting the tension between established structure and free form. That is to say that there is a need for structure to create a recognisable form (watchable narrative, comprehensible sound) in order to interest an audience enough not to alienate and confuse them. Various sources have emphasised a difference between male and female ways of approaching improvisation and sources have acknowledged an 'essentially' (I use this word advisedly) feminine influence on improvisation as a communal, co-operative activity at odds with individuation and competition. Sources have also highlighted that what emerges spontaneously in improvised situations does so out of embodied knowledge and internalised tropes. Putting this together with the communal creation aspect of improvised forms I can then summarise this as the act of working together communally to create something from nothing. In impro, this co-creation happens in a space/ time that is rarefied, being as it is outside of the dominant tropes of creative activity which usually has an author and clearly defined roles. In improvised forms, impro and especially in the Improvathon, these roles' borders and boundaries are transgressed and transversed and the participants play together at the thresholds.

1.4 An Introduction to the Thematic Concerns and Their Origins in the Literature

Impro is a theatrical form of spontaneous storytelling. It can appear onstage in several forms, sketch-style comedy (shortform), longer 'plays' (longform), competitive formats (where teams of improvisers are pitted against each other for the audience to vote a winning team) and durational formats of episodic soap-opera style dramas (the Improvathon). Each of these formats will be looked at in greater detail and within a contextual and historical framework in this chapter. An important factor that the various forms of comedy improvisation that I am examining here have in common is some degree of audience participation. This can range from direct address and communication with the audience to eliciting one suggestion from the audience of a theme for the whole evening's improvising to asking for a suggestion for every scene (suggestions are usually termed, 'ask fors'). Occasionally volunteers from the audience will enter the stage space and play with the improvisers. The purpose of this audience involvement is to add to the spontaneity of the performance and is a vital factor of the practice of improvisation.

Though sometimes termed 'Comedy Improvisation', to distinguish the form from musical improvisation and jazz, contact improvisation in dance and other forms of theatrical improvisation (i.e. the improvisation of serious plays), a very important aspect of the training and practice is avoiding the temptation to try to be funny in the sense of telling jokes (termed

'gagging') because 'gags' end stories and once the gag has been delivered, like the punchline to a joke, the story is over as the gag closes narrative possibilities. Jokes are useful, but improvisers are trained to create stories by 'building platforms' not by being funny, but by creating a range of emotional states on stage that serve to create rounded characters even in short scenes. It is, however, a curiosity of impro that it tends towards being funny. Perhaps this is because comedic forms of performance elicit an immediate response from and interaction with the audience through laughter, in the same way as Bakhtin's notion of 'carnival laughter' (Bakhtin, 1984, 11-12). This breaks the fourth wall, the imaginary boundary between the performance and the audience, by drawing the audience into the performance and potentially creating a sense of the collective/community and well-being, or liminal ludic communitas. In order to explore this idea I engage with theories in relation to notions of liminality, the ludic and community/communitas (Turner).

Ultimately this research will examine whether, through laughter, audience participation, breaking the fourth wall and the spontaneous task of making the story up in the moment, impro and in particular the Improvathon, creates a transformative space/time of togetherness and playfulness that temporarily disrupts the quotidian power structures, but contains certain power structures of its own. The themes emerging from the data collected from the case studies of female improvisers will be examined through the theories of Turner and Bakhtin and the notion of Liminal Ludic Communitas, or Playing Together at the Threshold will be fully articulated in Chapter Two. This is not to say that this is the only form of performance that can, or the only way to, access such a state. Indeed, other theatres can and do have the same effect, but impro, as developed by Keith Johnstone, emerged from a desire to see an audience as engaged in theatre as he observed them to be in pro-wrestling and to deviate from what Johnstone described as 'the theatre of taxidermy' (Johnstone, 1999, xi) . He states 'wrestling was the only form of working-class theatre that I'd seen, and the exaltation among the spectators was something I longed for, but didn't get from "straight" theatre' (Johnstone, 1999, 1). This is in line with Peter Brook's manifesto for theatre when he states 'the aim of improvisation in training actors in rehearsal [...] is to get away from Deadly Theatre' (Brook, 2008, 126). In Johnstone and Campbell's cases, however, they took the big risk of putting the training exercises on the stage as the performance and in doing so created a form of immediate theatre – impro.

At this point it is necessary to collide the previous frame of Foucault's critical, theoretical language with Sigmund Freud's language of psychoanalysis. In his essay, *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* (2001), Freud expresses the purpose of theatre as 'a question of opening up sources of pleasure or enjoyment in our emotional life' (Freud, 2001, 305) he goes on to say that 'joking or fun open up similar sources' and that 'being present as an interested spectator at a spectacle or play does for adults what play does for children' (Freud, 2001, 305). Freud does not look at the communal aspects of this

spectatorship and he certainly does not engage with the experience of being an actor on the stage, or any notion of exchange or collaboration between spectators and performers – all aspects of the experience of doing and watching impro that are key to this research. He is, through examining the experience of the individual, establishing that theatre spectatorship has the potential for transformative outcomes in the individual and that theatre has a ludic function. In the following quote he hints at the liminal qualities of theatre, that, perhaps to Freud, would have had a similar function to dreams as 'the royal road to the understanding of unconscious mental processes' (Freud, 2001, 397). Again, this is only dealt with by Freud at the level of the individual and not in any form of communitas; 'in the spectator [...] the process is carried through with his attention averted, and he is in the grip of his emotions instead of taking stock of what is happening' (Freud, 2001, 309). This subliminal process, Freud asserts, is akin to the psychoanalytical process in that 'repressed material reach[es] consciousness, owing to a lower resistance' (Freud, 2001, 309-10). This process is observable in impro training and practice. Improvisers are taught not to censor the material that comes to them spontaneously, but rather, in the moment, to express whatever comes to them without censoring themselves a technique Johnstone refers to as 'trusting your obvious' achieved by not planning and being in the moment, listening and paying attention to the 'now' (Johnstone, 2007). So the characters and situations that can emerge in improvised theatre can be repressed material from the subconscious that can then contain a sense of 'truthfulness' or, perhaps and expression of 'subjugated knowledge' that can, therefore, be seen as a form of 'insurrection'. Equally these subconscious materials can be self-policed recreations of conventional characters and situations. This is why improvisers who are schooled by Johnstone are taught not to 'try to be funny' because 'trying too hard' or trying consciously can suppress this process of going straight to the subconscious for material where the content of the improvised scenes can either subvert or reveal norms.

The research paper by McGill puts forward a strong case and sound evidence for the fact that theatrical improvisation, or the art of extemporising on stage, was in fact (re?)[2]introduced to the *Commedia* by female actors (see pages 20 and 123). McGill states, 'the development of repertory improvisation in the theatre occurred simultaneously with the appearance of women performers on the stage' (McGill, 1991, 59). It is curious then that the dominant practitioners of improvisation, especially in print, are largely male; Constantin Stanislavsky (director and founder of modern dramatic realism in acting, utilised improvisatory techniques in his work) , Del Close (US improv context derived form Viola Spolin's work), Keith Johnstone, Ken Campbell, Chris Johnston[3] though there are a minority of high profile female practitioners whose ideas around the practice of improvisation have appeared in print or

[2] It could be argued that improvised performance is the 'original' theatrical form as there was no original script prior to the beginnings of storytelling.

[3] founder of Fluxx and author of *The Improvisation Game* (2006) and not included in the research here.

online; Viola Spolin (see page 127), Charna Halpern (associate of Del Close), Patti Stiles (see page 114) and Deborah Frances-White (see page 111).

Amy Poehler, a Hollywood actress and improviser trained in the Del Close tradition of improv (outside of the parameters of this thesis but stemming from Viola Spolin's work in the US context – see page 127), is quoted in an online interview as saying:

> When it comes right down to it, it's talented people really that I like working with rather than male or female. I think females can use that as an excuse sometimes to say, "Oh, I'm not getting the respect I want on stage", and sometimes I agree, I think I do see groups where men steamroll a little bit and women's voices are not necessarily heard, but then I also see women choosing to be wives and mothers and girlfriends all the time [in improvised scenes]. So, if you're doing good longform with talented people then you can step out and you can be the president or a construction worker and people accept that. It's really the roles you give yourself.
>
> (Poehler, 2009)

Poehler, with much experience to draw on, indicates that women are both endowed with and endow themselves with roles that maintain gender norms. This is one of the questions of this research; can improvising performers subvert societal norms in their work in the same way that scripted and devised theatre can? Can an improviser be subversive in the moment or are roles so ingrained and successfully policed that 'as in life, as in impro'?

As Szekely has shown (2008) Jacques Derrida has been invoked in the discussion of improvisation. In *Ja* – or the *faux-bond* (1995), Derrida discusses improvisation with some effects that are pertinent to the research. He is being interviewed and during the interview he frames the act of being interviewed as an improvisation and asserts that the improvisation will unavoidably be imprinted with current concerns, current reading (Derrida, 1995, 30-31). Thinking of the interview as improvised speech he says 'there is no time to look for the right words' (Derrida, 1995, 32). The words that are chosen in this impromptu manner for Derrida are political, even politico-sexual; 'politics is always allied with whatever regulates the time to look for one's words' (Derrida, 1995, 32) but as a 'double contradictory effect' (Derrida, 1995, 34) 'it hounds the emitter so as to flush him out from behind any protective mediation [such as culture] forcing him to expose himself without any defences, his naked voice' (Derrida, 1995, 34). Derrida is ambivalent, at once aware that improvisations reveal preoccupations that are unavoidably influenced by politico-sexual and cultural regulations, or Foucault's dominant knowledges, but at the same time there is the danger (promise) of undefended utterances – Johnstone's ideal. For Derrida, improvisation is everywhere and nowhere 'I can no more improvise than escape improvisation [...] it/id improvises behind the back of the most controlled and masterful elaboration' (Derrida, 1995, 36). In contrast to the "process/product

at the same moment" that characterises improvised utterances Derrida critiques 'to produce [as] the big verb today' (Derrida, 1995, 37):

> And production is the all-purpose concept, just indeterminate around the edges to move in everywhere where other notions have been disqualified: notions like "creation", "causality", "genesis", "constitution", "formation" [...] "fabrication", "composition".
>
> (Derrida, 1995, 37)

Product, in the cultural hegemony, is placed firmly on top in the hierarchy of product and process. Process-based forms such as impro are marginalised. In culture, the consumer of culture usually sees the product at the end of the process whereas in impro the observer sees process and product existing together in the same moment in space and time. This make impro marginal, for as Derrida states; 'when its [production's] installation becomes so powerful, assured, dominant, almost saturating, one can always suspect some return of a dogmatism that, naturally, would be in the services of determined interests' (Derrida, 1995, 37) and not in the interest of subjugated knowers. Impro resists this because it can only be produced during the process of production.

Derrida goes on to reveal the inherent risk of improvising, the fear and danger of revealing oneself; 'it is a terrible thing that I do not love but that I want to love' he reveals before saying; 'I do not know why I go off in this direction while improvising' (Derrida, 1995, 49). It is the most interesting thing he reveals. The moment I read this I am moved to turn to the cover of the book where this philosopher is pictured because suddenly I want to know more; is this true? Why does he not love? Is he loved? What is the erudite philosopher's personal story? What makes him human? Before reading this I had barely noticed his face, now I studied it intently for more clues to this tantalising improvisation. After revealing this Derrida also explores the defences available to the improviser; 'a network of apparatuses and relays [...] has to interrupt the impromptu [...] in order to protect against improvised expositions' (Derrida, 1995, 49). In order to maintain defences 'one has to, one fails to improvise' (Derrida, 1995, 51). In impro, paradoxically, in order to take the risk, to improvise and to fail happily, one has to fail to defend instead. One has to remain completely open and unguarded. This is in opposition to the dominant order, which would have us fixed, closed, defended and individuated. The risk Derrida identifies is both, paradoxically intensified and alleviated via practising impro in a group during a process I have termed de-individuation (see page 49 and 154). Derrida places improvising at the margins, in opposition to the centre and to production. It is necessary to invoke theorists such as Turner in the following chapter in order to enhance Derrida's analysis and examine further the marginal aspects of impro and introduce its playful and communal aspects.

1.5 The Structure of the Thesis/Summary

The written thesis is necessarily a linear piece of work. However the nature of the subject matter at hand does not lend itself to this. Impro, its context and its history are not neatly linear. The subject of female identity is also messy and multiple, fragmented and non-linear. Finally, the nature of practice led research is such that a linear trajectory with logical beginnings and endings is not possible. To this end the written thesis itself is an illusory record of the actual research process. I have tried to accommodate the vagaries of this research and the discrepancy between the subject matter and this, the required end product, by allowing the thesis to jump around somewhat. To enable the reader to follow this weaving in and out of subjects, topics, ideas and points I have added in-text cross references that point the reader to the main section relevant to the topic that may be mentioned in passing elsewhere in the thesis.

The linear thesis structure can be constructed as follows; Chapter One has surveyed the existing research literature on impro and introduced themes and frames for the research and introduced the concepts of Liminal Ludic Communitas and 'yes-and'. I have defined the parameters of impro and the wider notion of improvisation in order to distinguish the particular concern of this research. I have also introduced the Improvathon, a particular long form that will be a focus of the research. Chapter Two examines various themes of liminality, the ludic and communitas as they occur in the literature out of which I draw the phrase – liminal ludic communitas – in order to apply this to understanding what is happening when performers improvise. In Chapter Three I examine the literature and thinking around the identity woman and the notion of the female performer and all the questions and troubling that this conjures. In Chapter Four I explore various methodologies available for this kind of research and show how I arrived at a method of action research with grounded theory as the most appropriate for this research. In Chapter Five I discuss the key players, both the case studies and the history, context and development of impro and the Improvathon. In Chapter Six I report on the analysed data by grouping it into themes through the process of applying the methodological strategies outlined in Chapter Four to the interviews and the literature. In Chapter Six I bring together my findings to present a conclusion to the research. The conclusion will discuss the themes raised in the research and answer the research questions and concerns as well as suggest further research into impro and wider connected contexts.

In summary; in this thesis I propose, with the help of Bakhtin, Foucault, Turner and Derrida, that impro is playful and carnivalesque, through which the grotesque can emerge in unguarded, open, improvisations and that this can challenge the dominant order, that the potent feminised trope of impro is one of communal creation and complicity with each other, the drive to 'yes-and' to propose and build a world together without competition, blocking and

destructive tendencies, without the desire to author, to name, and to categorise. When improvisers play together at the thresholds they are in a rarefied space/time. I aim to prove this through an analysis of female improvisers' experiences in impro in order to unpack these ideas through exploration of lived experience.

Yes-and....

Chapter Two Developing 'Liminal Ludic Communitas'

2.1 Introduction

Here I will introduce the idea of Liminal Ludic Communitas with reference to Victor Turner's work on the human seriousness of play, and his connection of ritual and theatre. I will also deploy Richard Schechner's ... as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's notions around the carnivalesque as both can be linked with the liminal, the ludic and the carnivalesque. I will also look at a range of other theorists who have developed these themes. I delve into these terms in more detail with a more detailed review of the literature. The main theme to be explored which has emerged through a methodology of grounded theory and the analysis of the raw data is the idea that performed impro produces a state of Liminal Ludic Communitas in players and/or audience. The question is whether this function and its effects undermine, reflect or uphold the dominant culture. Liminal Ludic Communitas is a phrase I am developing here that combines and develops Turner's terms liminality, the ludic and of togetherness through ritual, the ludic and liminality – communitas. These notions are also contained within Bakhtin's unique space and time of carnivalesque.

In his work, *From Ritual to Theatre; The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), Turner is charting his discoveries; 'from traditional anthropological studies of ritual performance to a lively interest in modern theatre, particularly experimental theatre' (Turner, 1982, 7). Turner is a theorist from the west observing and experiencing non-western traditions from a more nuanced and complex notion of power than the Foucauldian position. He critiques a Marxist position 'so obsessed with power that they fail to sense the many-levelled complexity (hence irony and forgivability) of human lives experienced first hand' (Turner, 1982, 9). Here he is suggesting that the arguments around colonial/neo-imperial ideologies in anthropology obfuscate the lived experience and interrelatedness of becoming a researcher in the field and argues that 'we should try to find out how and why different sets of human beings in time and space are similar and different in their cultural manifestations' (Turner, 1982, 8). In order to study this he invented a unit of description and analysis that he termed 'social drama' (Turner, 1982, 9) and he saw the connection and potential correlation between 'those sequences of supposedly "spontaneous" events which made fully evident the tensions existing in those villages, and the characteristic "processual form" of Western drama' (Turner, 1982, 9). Turner asserts that the roots of theatre are in 'social drama' except theatre has become a rarified 'professional' domain (Turner, 1982, 11-12). However, Turner seeks to broaden his field of study of western performance beyond the professional, processual drama when he states 'every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, and poetry, is explanation and explication of life itself [...] through the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of

sociocultural life , is drawn forth' (Turner, 1982, 13). The use of Turner's ideas and the development of the phrase 'liminal ludic communitas' from his work in order to be able to examine what is happening when performers improvise is wholly appropriate.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1984) Bakhtin concludes 'every act of history was accompanied by a laughing chorus' (Bakhtin, 1984, 474). For Bakhtin this chorus emerges from a 'folk culture' (Bakhtin, 1984, 4-5) that can be seen as subversive when read via Foucault's notion of the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledge' (Foucault, 1980, 81). Bakhtin summarises this folk culture as the 'carnivalesque' which is characterised as carnival humour and provides this thesis with a theory of comedy that illuminates the often comedic nature of impro. He states:

> Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.
>
> (Bakhtin, 1984, 7)

Whilst I recognise the hyperbolic nature of Bakhtin's description of carnival it is a concept that has been widely used to explore the potentially subversive nature of certain performing arts, such as stand-up comedy (Auslander, 2008, 42). Bakhtin's description of carnival hints at a space and time separate from the everyday that Auslander summarises as 'playful subversions of the established social and political order of things, which might otherwise appear fixed' (Auslander, 2008, 41). This playfulness can be characterised as 'ludic' which is defined as spontaneous and undirected playfulness. This ludic quality of the carnivalesque is a space and time somehow apart from the everyday and has much in common with Turner's theory of the liminal. Turner defines liminality as a threshold or borderplace, 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 2004, 89); 'liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial [...] Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or moon' (Turner, 2004, 89). These, descriptions could all be characterised as Foucault's subjugated knowledges. It is during this liminal '"moment in and out of time" and in and out of secular social structure' (Turner, 2004, 90) that subjugated knowledges perhaps have their moment. As this structure transforms in the liminal process, Turner asserts that what emerges is a state of 'communion of equal

individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (Turner, 2004, 90) that he terms communitas. In the case of impro the 'ritual elders' can be interpreted as the director, the 'rules' or structures of the practice or even the structure of language itself that keep it from falling into incomprehensible chaos. As will be shown, in the context of the Improvathon a rarefied space/time is created that has a ritual ordeal quality to it.

2.2 **Liminal** Ludic Communitas

Liminality is the term Victor Turner has developed from Arnold van Gennep's anthropological model of ritual in tribal cultures. Van Gennep's model of rites of passage for the initiation of individuals and/or societies consisted of a three stage process; separation, transition and incorporation referring to the ritual processes of rites of passage ceremonies, birth, marriage and death rites and seasonal change rituals (Turner, 1982, 24). In the separation phase a special space and time separate from quotidian space and time is clearly marked out (Turner, 1982, 24). In the following phase of transition the 'subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a "margin" or "threshold" termed by van Gennep "the limen"' (Turner, 1982, 24). Incorporation, the third phase, indicates a return to every day space and time but with some new understanding or a new social status (Turner 1982, 24-5). Turner, an anthropologist, charts a personal trajectory of discovery from the anthropology of ritual performance to modern theatre, especially experimental theatre (Turner, 1982, 7). Turner devised the term "social drama" to examine in the field (African villages) the '"theatrical" potential of social life [...] supposedly "spontaneous" events which made fully evident the tensions existing in those villages' (Turner, 1982, 9). From here it was a simple step to apply the same analytical paradigm to western theatre (Turner, 1982, 9). Turner believes that the roots of theatre are in social drama (Turner, 1982, 11) i.e. as a mode of expression for the micro to macro tensions of society (Turner, 1982, 9-11) and that theatre, in its broadest terms, is multi-purpose:

> Performances are presented which probe a community's weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desacralise its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristics conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known "world".
>
> (Turner, 1982, 11)

Turner emphasises throughout his writings the modern western equivalents for ritual/ rites of passage thereby bridging the gap between his extensive field studies of tribal, agrarian societies and large, technological and complex western societies. He cites the example of the army recruit's first obeying of a military order as having the structure of van Gennep's three phases (Turner, 1982, 25). Turner examines the liminal state of the initiand (the person undergoing the rite of passage) and finds that it is a time of suspension from the normal social structure where commonly unacceptable activity such as theft becomes tolerated and they are 'temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure [...] liberate[d] from structural

obligations' (Turner, 1982, 27). This corresponds with Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival of 'world-upside-down' where gender and other binary hierarchies are up-ended for a permitted time: 'It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organisation, which is suspended for the time of the festivity' (Bakhtin, 1984, 255). This serves the purpose of society's 'safety valve'; a licensed protest where everything will revert to the original power structures after this liminal time (Bakhtin, 1984, 9, 71 & 90).

Turner observes that some or all of the genres of performance are encountered or experienced during this liminal time such as dancing, singing, chanting, masking, story-telling and the activities of liminal space-time can be ludic and even subversive (Turner, 1982, 27). Again, this is the same in Bakhtin's poly-vocal carnivalesque where many forms of expression occur in an disorderly manner (Bakhtin, 1984, 41). Meaning becomes multivalent and heterogeneous, suspended from cultural norms and the 'factors or elements of culture may be recombined in numerous, often grotesque ways' (Turner, 1982, 27). Turner summarises; 'in other words, in liminality people "play" with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarise them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements' (Turner, 1982, 27). Turner cites Brian Sutton-Smith, who developed Turner's term "anti-structure" (a term he used to describe the aspects of the liminal that I have been discussing), as stating that the liminal phase 'is the source of new culture' (Turner, 1982, 28). According to Turner, Sutton-Smith is referring specifically to the continuum of "order-disorder" in children's and adults' games, which Turner confidently applies to both liminal ritual and "liminoid" masking, mumming, carnival etc., and inferring that the attraction of the disorderliness of games is because games are either a way of letting off steam in reaction to too much order or because being disorderly offers both children and adults the opportunity for learning (Turner, 1982, 28). Turner describes himself as being fascinated by Sutton-Smith's formulations because liminal and liminoid situations are seen as:

> The settings in which new models, symbols, paradigms etc., arise – as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact. These new symbols and constructions then feed back into the "central" economic and politico-legal domains and arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, structural models and raisons d'etre.
> (Turner, 1982, 28)

This has echoes with the idea that the centre looks to the margins to re-invent itself and to assimilate what is either threatening or useful to it. Impro troubles this paradigm as it straddles the centre and the margin, having much in common with the aforementioned order-disorder continuum of games, depending as it does on order and structure to provide the liminal space-time in which the disorder can occur and produce the outcomes of new knowledge or steam-venting. The fact that there is no lasting tangible "product" resulting as an outcome of impro

sets it aside from performance that is repeatable, in Richard Schechner's terms; "restoring the past" (Schechner, 1985). Turner adds to the concept of the liminal the notion of "liminoid" which is like a shadow of the liminal, resembling it but without being identical (Turner, 1982, 32). Turner sees the liminoid as an "anti-structural" 'independent domain of creative activity' (Turner, 1982, 32-3) representative of the time-spaces of dominant (western) cultures where innovation occurs. For Turner this liminal/liminoid time-space is where "play" or the ludic ferments. And Bakhtin adds: 'The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective idealistic philosophy. It ceased to be the concrete [...] experience of the one, inexhaustible being' (Bakhtin, 1984, 37). Turner argues that the distinction between work and play is a product of the modern industrial scene and that 'in the liminal phases and states of tribal and agrarian cultures – in ritual, myth, and legal processes – work and play are hardly distinguishable' (Turner, 1982, 34). So Turner extrapolates that in simpler societies work and play form an integrated whole whereas the hierarchical binary in modern industrial capitalist society between work and play – which Turner connects historically to Calvinism and the "protestant work ethic" (Turner, 1982, 37) – creates the notion of leisure. Leisure is the modern socio-industrial liminal space-time where denizens find freedom from the institutional obligations of social organisation and imposed rhythms as well as the freedom to 'enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions [and] transcend social structural limitations' (Turner, 1982, 37). This leads to the ludic, 'the freedom to play...with ideas, with fantasies, with words, with paint and with social relationships' (Turner, 1982, 37). In this modern industrial liminal space-time; leisure, the ludic and experimental are stressed more than in the equivalent liminal space-time in tribal and agrarian rites and ceremonies (Turner, 1982, 37).

The paradox identified by Turner is that the rules of liminal leisure space-time activities, because the activities are optional, conversely are part of an individual's or community's freedom (Turner, 1982, 37). Further Turner posits that leisure has the potential to release individual or communal creativity with the power 'either to criticise or buttress the dominant social structural values' (Turner, 1982, 37). He theorises that this is because the pleasure of leisure work stands in contrast to the alienation of labour inherent to much industrial labour (Turner, 1982, 37). So leisure space-time in a post-industrial capitalist society 'can be conceived of as a betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that domain between two spells of work or between occupational and familial and civic activity' (Turner, 1982, 40) and, therefore, similar to the liminal of pre-industrial society. In this leisure time are the activities of 'theatre, poetry, novel, ballet, film, sport, rock music, classical music, art, pop art, etc.' (Turner, 1982, 40) and, like the 'tribesmen [who] make masks, disguise themselves as monsters, heap up disparate ritual symbols, invert or parody profane reality in myths and folk-tales [they] *play*

with the factors of culture, sometimes assembling them in random, grotesque, improbable, shocking, usually experimental combinations [emphasis in original]' (Turner, 1982, 40).

In the post-industrial culture there is a greater level of complexity and sophistication in this liminal activity than in tribal cultures and a multiplicity of artistic and entertainment specialisations, that, according to Turner are; 'mass culture, pop culture, folk culture, high culture, counterculture, underground culture etc.' (Turner, 1982, 40). This heterogeneity of genres allows the makers 'to generate not only weird forms, but also, and not infrequently, models, direct and parabolic or aesopian, that are highly critical of the *status quo* as a whole or in part [emphasis in original]' (Turner, 1982, 40) or 'buttress, reinforce, justify, or otherwise seek to legitimate the prevailing social and cultural mores and political orders' (Turner, 1986, 40). In drawing these two distinctions, between criticality of and support for the dominant culture, Turner declares the latter closer to the function of the liminal in tribal cultures and labels it "pseudo-liminal" or "post-liminal" (Turner, 1982, 40). He states, 'the *liminal* phases of tribal society invert but do not usually subvert the *status quo* [emphases in original]' (Turner, 1982, 41). In his notion of "post-liminal", he includes satire in this category stating 'a mirror inverts but also reflects an object. It does not break it down into constituents in order to remould it, far less does it annihilate and replace that object' (Turner, 1982, 41). It is possible that some aspects of impro fall into the realm of satirical reflection, particularly in the portrayal of gender stereotypes. At the same time, however, the act and structure of improvisation does serve to deconstruct and even destroy some aspects of mainstream dominant theatrical forms. The main distinction between liminal and liminoid that Turners identifies is that of choice (Turner, 1982, 42-3). The liminal is characterised as 'a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory' (Turner, 1982, 43). The liminoid is characterised by 'play and choice, an entertainment' (Turner, 1982, 43). Turner observes this function in carnival where acting invertedly is a choice (Turner, 1982, 43) as opposed to tribal ritual which is a compulsory function for all members of a tribal society designed to maintain the status quo. This has echoes with Richard Schechner's distinction between "make believe" and "make belief" (Schechner, 2004) where the notion of "play" is invoked by "make believe" and the ensuing distinction from "work" whereas "make belief" is a combination of play and work concerned with the serious travail of the construction and maintenance of society. It could be argued that a function of post-industrial society such as the police force epitomises this "work-play" "space-time" of "make belief" as they do the serious work of maintaining order through the illusion or "play" of power. The police play a role and wear a "costume" in order to "make belief" that they are powerful enough to maintain order with the weight of rule of law behind them legitimising their "let's pretend" and making compulsory peoples' engagement with this

pretence. This is in contrast to the liminoid space-time of entertainment genres chosen by their participants as play separated from work (Turner, 1982, 43).

Another distinction between liminal and liminoid is that of the individual and the community where in liminal phenomena the individual is subsumed by the community or "communitas" whereas in "liminoid" phenomena 'great public stress is laid on the individual innovator, the unique person who dares and opts to create' (Turner, 1982, 43-4). My experience and that of the interviewees indicates that there is a general movement in impro to experience communitas characterised by the communal creation of content in the moment. Impro, therefore, sits between liminoid as defined by this public stress on the individual creator and liminal as a communal activity and function. Liminoid theatre in Turner's formulation has echoes with Schechner's "restoring the past" and "twice behaved behaviour" (Schechner, 2004) which has more in common with scripted, rehearsed theatre than impro. Impro is liminal because it occurs in the "now" without rehearsal. Although it arguably engages twice behaved behaviours through the training of improvisers to follow certain "rules" or "habits" and through the reflection on stage of cultural norms of behaviour even if these are mocked or turned upside-down.

Turner defines liminality as a betwixt-and-between space-time outside of the quotidian functioning of a society within which the playful or ludic can occur. In tribal societies this ludic aspect of the liminal is characterised as a form of working play, or ergic-ludic, ritual liminality. Turner takes the word 'ergic' from the Greek 'ergon' meaning work and adds it to ludic (play) to denote a holistic approach to work/play. In post-industrial societies the post- or pseudo-liminal serves to uphold the status quo and is also ergic-ludic, whereas the "liminoid" is leisure time, set aside from work, optional or anergic-ludic, play separated from work, where play can subvert the status quo even if temporarily or in the imagination only. Impro at first glance appears to contain elements of both liminality and the liminoid. Certainly Turner's description of the liminal as a period of time when 'the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance' (Turner, 1982, 44) has echoes in impro because the creation happens in the moment. It is not pure, however, because while the stories, characters and relationships in impro are created in the present as opposed to the "restoring the past" nature of scripted, devised or choreographed performance, there is no such thing as "once behaved behaviour" so the material of improvised performance is still generated through "twice-behaved-behaviour". In other words the improvised performance is not created in a cultural vacuum and unlike scripted, devised and choreographed performance is more likely to mirror, or possibly invert, social regulations rather than subvert them. In this respect

improvised performance has more in common with the liminal than the liminoid. As Turner says 'the tribal liminal, however exotic in appearance, can never be much more than a subversive flicker' (Turner, 1982, 44). Arguably the very existence of this tribal liminality in a modern post-industrial individuated society *is* subversive. For just as Turner argues that the liminal of tribal ritual in simpler societies is the seed of the revolutionary liminoid in their socially complex "developed" future so perhaps the tribal liminal traces in complex societies subvert the "divide and conquer" imperative of individuation in the military-industrial complex that drives the engines of capitalism – consumption, scarcity, and disconnection.

In *Liminal Acts* (1999) Susan Broadhurst explores the aesthetics of liminal performance. She examines what she considers to be liminal performances in the genres of film, theatre and music though she stresses the intertextual/interdisciplinary as a condition of liminality (Broadhurst, 1999, 24). She highlights certain characteristics of liminal performance such as; self-reflexivity, stating 'its formation processes are not hidden but foregrounded' (Broadhurst, 1999, 5). Broadhurst invokes Nietzsche's notion of the Dionysian aspect of art, proposing that the Dionysian features of immediacy, disruption and excess are also liminal qualities (Broadhurst, 1999, 9). She also cites Heidegger's hermeneutic aesthetic perspective stating, 'art does not merely reveal things; more importantly, 'it lets things be', it is the 'becoming' or 'happening' of 'truth'' (Broadhurst, 1999, 9). In establishing a set of criteria for identifying liminal performance Broadhurst states:

> These hybrid performances share certain aesthetic features such as innovation, indeterminacy, marginality, and an emphasis on the intersemiotic. In addition they continually challenge traditional theatrical concepts. [L]iminal performance does have a political dimension, in as much as it is a site of immediate aesthetic intervention that has an indirect effect on the political, and it is, therefore, an experimental extension of our contemporary culture and times.
>
> (Broadhurst, 1999, 10)

This notion of an indirect effect on the political is crucial to both liminality and an understanding of the liminality of impro. Broadhurst summarises Turner's use of the term liminal as describing 'a certain marginalised space which holds a possibility of potential forms, structures, conjectures and desires' (Broadhurst, 1999, 12) this description of the liminal can certainly be applied to the space-time of improvised performance and its varying formats. Turner characterises the liminal space as both a 'fructile chaos and a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities' (Turner, 1990, 11-12) and a place of ambiguous identity, as heterogeneous, experimental and marginalised. Guay's description of impro as "almost theatre" certainly situates impro as a marginalised theatrical form, at once too popular and "lightweight" to be taken seriously by the theatrical "centre" and too ambiguous, unfixed and risky to be taken seriously as popular culture. This "in-between" position for impro within the

fixed categories of performance bestows upon it a liminality being as it is 'located at the edge of what is possible' (Broadhurst, 1999, 12). Turner describes the liminal phase as 'being dominantly in the "subjunctive mood" of culture, the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire' (Turner, 1990, 11-12). This description accords neatly with the 'in the moment' creation of improvised performance. Johnstone requests improvisers to not plan ahead and not to come into the scene with a plan.

Broadhurst asserts that theatre director, Bertholdt Brecht, was driven to reveal the artifice of theatre through revealing the mechanisms as a reaction against Constantin Stanislavky's naturalism with his theory of epic theatre. This was inspired by Chinese theatre where 'the performance demonstrates not only the behaviour of the characters but also the behaviour of the actors' (Broadhurst, 1999, 20). Yet Broadhurst ultimately jettisons Brecht's theories of epic theatre from her aesthetic theory of liminal performance based mainly on the fact that his ideology, for a didactic (Broadhurst, 1999, 169) politically messaged theatre whose intention was to rouse the populace, is not universal enough and only impacts upon localised and informed audiences and, therefore, preaches to the converted (Broadhurst, 1999, 23). Conversely, theatre director, Antonin Artaud's theory is jettisoned for being grounded in a fixed and universalising essentialism (Broadhurst, 1999, 169) with his 'theatre of cruelty' despite being quoted as saying 'theatre is a kind of organised anarchy' (Broadhurst, 1999, 25) which is very apt description of improvisation with its parameters and freedoms existing alongside each other. Broadhurst though is looking for an aesthetic theorisation of liminal performance whereas I am also looking for an experiential theorisation of liminal performance in relation to improvisation. I am looking both from outside and from inside the work as, at the same time, in performing improvisation, one is both audience and performer, especially during the Improvathon. However, her liminal aesthetic of performance contains many elements that can be applied to impro.

Broadhurst states:

> Liminal does not set itself up as an opposing structure to dominant ideologies. In fact, it appears at times to be complicit with mainstream trends. Nevertheless, it does display a parodic, questioning, deconstructive mode which presents a resistance.
>
> (Broadhurst, 1999, 168)

As she further defines the liminal she asserts that it is performing at the edge of the possible and mirrors the contemporary social and cultural ethos (Broadhurst, 1999, 168). The liminal is hybridised and intertextual with features of: heterogeneity, indeterminacy, self-reflexiveness, eclecticism and fragmentation (Broadhurst, 1999, 168-9). Broadhurst even goes as far as to say that the liminal aesthetic she is recognising in certain performance forms invokes 'sensations

evoked by the sublime' (Broadhurst, 1999, 171). Ultimately, Broadhurst, recognises the 'delegitimisation of authority' conferred by liminal performance and she states:

> The spectators' new freedom includes their emancipation from the specific textual interpretation of directors and actors, or what Wilson calls the 'fascist directing and acting' of Western theatre today.
>
> (Broadhurst, 1999, 172)

This paradigm of liminal cultural phenomena is distinct from Turner's paradigm of the liminoid. Liminal cultural phenomena are 'collective, integrated obligatory ritual action[s]' (St John, 1999, 37) that are 'the work of the Gods' (St John, 1999, 38) and exist in pre-industrial and simpler tribal communities. Whereas, liminoid phenomena:

> Emerge in feudal, but predominantly capitalist societies with a complex social and economic division of labour, and are perceived to involve the voluntary and idiosyncratic action of moderns. With a stress on individuality and open-ended processes, they are seen to occur within leisure settings apart from work, are experimental and exploratory, plural and fragmentary, developing along the margins of society, forming social critique and providing the potential for the subversion of the status quo. They are also commodities, and, to a considerable degree, are 'deprived of direct transcendental reference' (Turner 1992:160). The crucial difference here is that the liminoid is said to be freer than the liminal.
>
> (St John ,1999, 38)

Liminoid phenomena may be freer in that they are less visibly controlled by a small, self-regulating society and have more room for subversive behaviour, but it is also a problem to distinguish between modern and postmodern entertainments that merely mimic the ludic in order to satisfy a craving for the liminal space (bread and circuses) through alienation techniques and the bypass of communitas. Screen-based entertainments, for example, are a beguiling replacement for the embodied and interactive play that is inherent in the practice of impro. Perhaps the difference between liminal and liminoid can be most succinctly paraphrased by Turner himself as 'ritual [liminal] says "let us believe", while play [liminoid] says, "this is make believe"' (Turner in Bial, 2004, 325). In fact, as Turner asserts; 'liminality may be for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, of disorder into order, rather than the milieu of creative interhuman or transhuman satisfactions and achievements [as] liminality is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm' (Turner, 1982, 46-47). This is dangerous liminality akin to Foucault's subjugated knowledges and in need of dominance and control. Bakhtin shows how the liminal space and time of carnival has been rendered liminoid:

> We observe a process of gradual narrowing down of the ritual, spectacle, and carnival forms of folk culture [...] The state encroached upon festival life and

> turned it into a parade [...] Festivities were brought into the home and became part of the family's private life [...] The carnival spirit with its freedom, its utopian character oriented towards the future, was gradually transformed into a mere holiday mood. The feast ceased almost entirely to be the people's second life, their temporary renaissance and renewal.
>
> (Bakhtin, 1984, 33)

Bakhtin felt that the potential was not entirely lost and that the carnivalesque is still a fertilising agent for both life and culture (Bakhtin, 1984, 34) but he tells above, in his notion of the 'second life' of the loss of the communal aspects of the liminal space and time of carnival. It was through carnivalesque laughter or the ludic that this second life, or liminal space and time was created outside of the official or dominant power structures.

2.3 Liminal **Ludic** Communitas

Ludic, from the Latin *ludere*, 'to play' is etymologically defined as playful. Mihali Csikszentmihalyi (1975), Turner (1982) and subsequently Schechner (1993) have all characterised the ludic as potentially transformative and, therefore, in need of harnessing, licensing, packaging by the dominant order. Massimo Raveri, in the introduction to *Japan at Play; The Ludic and the Logic of Power* (2002) argues that:

> Play seems to be such a simple activity. But the more we think about it, the more we analyse it, the more complex and elusive it reveals itself to be. It seems at first to be superfluous, but on the contrary it is fundamental: all human beings play in different ways at any age.
>
> (Raveri, 2002, 1)

Turner identifies that in western industrial culture there has been a separation between work and play, turning play into leisure, a separate space and time form work. In industrial societies, there is a failure to understand the importance of "social drama" as an ergic-ludic function that is a communal necessity. Consequently, Turner believes that the distinction between work and play is indeed an artefact of the industrial revolution (Turner, 1982, 30-32). He argues that the play of pre-industrial societies is considered to be very serious and has the serious communal function of maintaining order in society which is why ritual social drama is inseparable from work and described by Turner as 'ergic-ludic' but what would look to western industrial denizens like leisure time activities, for example:

> There are undoubtedly "ludic" aspects in "tribal", etc., culture, especially in the liminal periods of protracted initiation or calendrically based rituals. Such would include joking relationships, sacred games, such as the ball games of the ancient Maya and modern Cherokee, riddles, mock-ordeals, holy fooling, and clowning, Trickster tales told in liminal times and places, in or out of ritual contexts.
>
> (Turner, 1982, 32)

Western society's emphasis on productive work and non-productive leisure has created a separation from the seriousness of play as an important social function. Despite such media-developed phrases as "work hard, play hard" – or perhaps because of – this phrase separates the two. In fact, the west has largely packaged play into a consumable product to be worked at in leisure-time; such as going to the gym and engaging in sports. In a sense it is less a separation of work and play into opposites, but rather a de-integration of work and play; both have to be similarly worked hard at but are two separate fields. Despite the fact that Turner states:

> "Work" is held to be the realm of rational adaptation of means to ends, of "objectivity", while "play" is thought of as divorced from this essentially "objective" realm, and, in so far as it is its inverse, it is "subjective", free from external constraints, where any and every combination of variable can be "played" with.
>
> (Turner, 1982, 34)

I would argue that the commodification of leisure time makes it just as hard work as productive work and just as un-free. Bakhtin states that since the renaissance: 'the individual body was presented as apart from its relation to the ancestral body of the people' (Bakhtin, 1984, 29) or apart from the communal body. Of the carnivalesque, on the other hand, Bakhtin states: 'Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people [...] It is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants' (Bakhtin, 1984, 11). The industrial west has, in allowing the fragmentation of the ludic, given itself the worst of all worlds; individuated identities pressured to work hard and play hard and remain productive consumers, destined to never be just aimlessly idling in the kinds of activities children are permitted, such as simple 'mooching'. In fact, even children today are pressured to be constructively, productively playing lest they become 'bored' and, therefore, useless. However, as Turner points out; 'leisure [or play de-integrated from work] is potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticise or buttress social structural values' (Turner, 1982, 37). Turner places the responsibility for the complex and troubled western relationship to 'play'/'leisure' on to Protestant and in particular Calvinist residues (Turner, 1982, 37-39) when he states; 'something of this systematic, vocational character of the Protestant ethic came to tinge even the entertainment genres of industrial leisure [...] even leisure became ergic "of the nature of work" rather than "ludic"' (Turner, 1982, 39) and hence the professionalisation of the arts ensues and these past-times cease to be everyday and ordinary but instead become reified; the ludic arts become something that only talented, trained professionals do. Impro could be classified as 'pointless' play being unproductive and largely unviable economically in the UK context.

Schechner associates play or the ludic with risk, citing the theatre workshop where players need to be made to feel secure before they can delve into the more risky areas. It is the same with impro and that is why there is a training, a structure and games. With more experience the formats loosen and structures expand, which is where the potential for more risk is generated. As Schechner states; 'play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing [...] in fact the fun of playing [...] is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies' (Schechner, 1993, 26-7). This accords with Bakhtin's notions of the world-upside-down time and space of the carnival. He states:

> The spirit of carnival liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fears [...] All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities.
>
> (Bakhtin, 1984, 47)

In other words, the carnivalesque makes play with serious or important forms, rendering them impotent and controllable. The dominant power can make use of this powerful ability of the ludic just as much as the subjugated knower.

Modern, adult play can be characterised as the carnivalesque, which if, care is not taken, can license play in such a way as to remove its claws and, therefore, its threat to power. Modern adult play could be characterised as autistic. An autistic child finds it hard to engage in spontaneous, communal, co-operative play in the way that neuro-typical children do. The modern adult, in order to engage in play, needs an appropriately designated time, space and context where play is allowed. This is often a semi-public (party, festival, club, the impro workshop, sports) or private (computer gaming, 'me' time) space-time that has been paid for, therefore, licensed play has been commodified as 'leisure' in Turner's terms. Like the autistic child the fledging improviser has to learn to cede control to the co-creation of the group and has to learn to be unsafe. As Schechner states; 'security is needed at the outset of play more than later on. Once play is underway, risk, danger and insecurity are part of playing's thrill' (Schechner, 1993, 27). Re-learning to embrace the risk inherent in spontaneous play, especially when that play is extemporised for an audience, takes careful training but the remembered joy of performing unbridled silliness for peers and parents as a child is perhaps barely buried. Harnessing this playful nature and focussing it through a lens of story, character, culture and psychology is potentially a source of joy for players of improvisation. And this is an important function, for, to be playful, as Bakhtin says, is to: 'escape the false "truth of this world" in order to look at the world with eyes free from this "truth" [...] great changes [...] are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way' (Bakhtin, 1984, 49).

Massimo Raveri, in *Japan at Play* (2002), states: 'starting to play means keying acts, words and thoughts into a different tune. It means entering freely and passionately into an 'other' reality – a parallel and abstract world – delimited in time and space as if between inverted commas 'this is play'' (Ravieri, 2002, 1). He also sketches the false distinction between ordinary life and play and work and play, by suggesting that; 'what has to be redefined is the concept of 'serious', 'real' behaviour seen in antithesis to the 'ludic'' (Ravieri, 2002, 1) and explores the idea that the distinctions between serious reality and playful make-believe are very porous borders; "reality' is a relativistic dimension and play offers the possibility of 'restructuring' it, constantly modifying its perspectives and aims' (Ravieri, 2002, 1). The implication here is that play has a power to it that can challenge dominant power structures through inversion and parody – a check and balance on the social and political structures that police freedom and fluidity. Raveri further explores the duality of the ludic function which is similarly a question for the carnivalesque:

> Play is the ground on which traditional ideas could be experienced and learnt, but it is also a delimited context to try out alternative and innovative fantasies that could be a source of inspiration for new forms in culture [..] That is why power is continuously interfering in the world of play, trying also to control its weight in the society at large. Indeed when ludic expressions become excessive [...] they represent a threat to the stability of society. When, on the contrary, ludic performances are severely repressed, culture risks stagnation.
>
> (Ravieri, 2002, 4)

Of course out of that repression can arise the most playfully innovative forms, such as impro, which arose, for Johnstone, out of a context of the extreme censorship of British theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. Raveri summarises and unifies this duality by invoking Turner's liminality:

> Play could be an idea interpreted as a liminal situation in which received ideas, conformist sentiments and traditional norms are fragmented and rearranged in a bricolage of fascinating and fragile combinations. Every example of play would be a powerful commentary on life. In the 'hypothetical' way of re-enacting the world that pertains to the nature of play, man invents, undoes and remakes 'reality' without fear of becoming imprisoned within it.
>
> (Ravieri, 2002, 4)

In relation to Bakhtin's profoundly ludic space, the carnival, and its diverted trope the carnivalesque this undoing and inverting of reality occurs safely in the designated space/time of the carnival calendar or contexts of the novel and other cultural forms as a safety-valve mechanism that reasserts the stale status quo afresh, dissipating dissension before reality is permanently affected by the ludic. This then reasserts power structures and hierarchies in favour of the dominant culture. If this is the case does the ludic have any real teeth and claws? Bakhtin thinks so, for, even in the carnivalesque (as opposed to the actual carnival) 'we always

experience a peculiar gay freedom of thought and imagination [and even the] *id*[4] is uncrowned as transformed into a "funny monster"' (Bakhtin, 1984, 49).

In the chapter *Upsetting the Public; Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts* by Clair Wills (2001) she proposes that 'while carnival and hysteria are excluded from official public norms, the question should be how to dialogise the public realm by bringing the excluded and 'non-official' into juxtaposition with the 'official'' (Wills, 2001, 86). By examining the relationships between dominant forms and their 'other' (theatre and impro; men and women) in this research I am hoping to begin this dialogic juxtaposition. Wills again; 'analogously the lawlessness of the witch, hysteric and the proletarian woman must be brought within the public sphere, conforming to some extent with its norms, if it is to become a language which can engage politically with the official language' (Wills, 2001, 96).

Wills situates Bakhtin's theory of carnival (as derived from his critical reading of Rabelais) as populist and utopian and especially its appropriation in arguing for the "transgressive" potential of carnivalesque literature, as highlighted by Stallybrass and White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986). Wills points out that 'literary carnival doesn't possess the same social force as actual carnival may once have done' (Wills, 2001, 85).

Wills' essay explores the hysterical female text, poetry and the transition from private to public discourse. She shows that 'the constructive role of the 'hysterical' text will depend above all on the function which the work performs, both in relation to the writer's private life, and in bringing this private life into conflict with public norms' (Wills, 2001, 86). In a sense the improviser does a similar thing through the complicit 'text' that is 'written' in the moment of creation which may either reflect or subvert society's norms, either of which can be comedic and cause an audience to enjoy this playing with reality. Wills' foray into the worlds of carnivalesque and grotesque through the figure of the female hysteric provides an interesting ground that is echoed here in the use of women as the subjects of research. Wills' essay is concerned with the status of carnival within the literary canon and especially Bakhtin's assertion that carnival's world-upside-down-ness becomes subversively powerful when brought into 'dialogic relation to official forms' (Wills, 2001, 87). She cites Bakhtin's privileging of Rabelais' ability to dialogise the popular with the official in literature thereby creating an ideological carnival and elevating its status. I would argue in line with John Docker's thesis on post-modernism (in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, 1994) that the project that Rabelais (perhaps) began has culminated in the appropriation of the 'otherness' of carnival into the official culture (thereby securing its commodification making it productive and controllable) as

[4] The shadow-side of the ego as defined by Freud

evidenced in popular culture, soap opera, pop music and, ultimately, pornography – the abject telos of carnival. To a certain extent, as Chris Johnston argues, this has happened to impro as well, the appropriation for example of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed from the third world to first world corporate and business development contexts (*The Improvisation Game*, 2006, 67-8).

Wills uses the figure of the hysteric to explore the dialoguing of popular and official. An important source of discourse on the hysteric is, of course, Freud. Wills states, 'the carnival role of the grotesque body in mocking, degrading and inverting high culture has [in Freud] been displaced onto the psyche of the hysteric. Was the 'madness' of these Viennese women then the belated representation of playful popular carnival which has been suppressed (or appropriated and assimilated) by the dominant culture? For Freud the repressed past survives in woman (Wills, 2001). Wills asks how the unruly hysteric 'other' body can find a stage without becoming 'a spectacle for the male gaze' (Wills, 2001, 90), or rather without becoming assimilated into the dominant culture (for Laura Mulvey's construction of the male gaze see page 54). For Wills this tension between making public this private madness is expressed in Bakhtin's carnivalesque notion that, 'the extended, protruding, secreting grotesque body was able to resist and destabilise the monumental, static, classical body precisely because of its *openness*' (Wills, 2001, 91, emphasis in original). Its strength is also its weakness and this tension between vulnerability and potency is the knife edge upon which the transgression, subversion and protest of 'other' resides. On the other hand, perhaps, as Wills cites Stallybrass and White, the notion is that this project is another manifestation of the bourgeois subject figuring the mode of carnival, as a place of intoxicating freedom and radical subversion (Wills, 2001, 93). Is improvisation both for the players and the audience simply a touristic visit to a ludic space-time or as some of the research subjects claim does its practice have real transformative effects upon lived experience and reality? Does it turn worlds upside down?

Natalie Zemon-Davis in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975), her revisionist social history of medieval women, would say no it does not; 'students of these festive and literary forms have ordinarily come to the same conclusion as anthropologists regarding the limits of symbolic inversion: a world-turned-upside-down can only be righted, not changed' (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 131). She also cites Ian Donaldson; 'the lunatic governor [...] the incompetent judge, the mock doctor, the equivocating priest, the hen-pecked husband: such are the familiar and recurrent figures in the comedy of society which gives a general assent to the necessity of entrusting power to its governors, judges, doctors, priests and husbands' (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 131). Similarly in impro the inevitable parodying of power figures, hierarchies and relations does nothing to change the imbalances of power outside of the theatre and may well support these structures by pressing the purge button on pent up

frustrations through comedic audience responses. However, Zemon-Davis also argues 'that comic and festive inversion could undermine as well as reinforce that assent through its connections with everyday circumstances outside the privileged time of carnival and stage-play' (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 131). So playful parody also has the potential to continue to make audiences consider power structures and their inequalities outside of the ludic space-time of the improvised performance. I propose that, more than through the content of the performance, which is by nature uncontrollable, this could occur through the form of the performance. In the playful communal creation that is occurring when practitioners making the performance up in the moment with no prior script there is perhaps a reminder of a mythical past where creative complicity was the dominant trope of society. That is to say, it perhaps reminds practitioners of a fictional utopian moment when small tribal societies would entertain themselves through storytelling around a fire.

For woman, the 'other' of society, the parodic figure of the disorderly, hysterical, carnivalesque woman (the female buffoon):

> Did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioural options for women within and even outside marriage, and, second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society. The woman-on-top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behaviour.
>
> (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 131)

Playful carnival inversions, of which the unruly female was one, served not only to reinforce the order of things, but also to open up new possibilities for different orders, giving the subaltern a voice (Zemon Davis, 1975, 150-1). 'Rather than expending itself primarily during the privileged duration of the joke, the story, the comedy, or the carnival, topsy-turvy play had much spillover into everyday "serious" life, and the effects there were sometimes disturbing and even novel [...] this inversion could prompt new ways of thinking about the system and reacting to it" (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 143) Much of the time subaltern men dressed as women to engage in riotous and political protest behaviour but Zemon-Davies also records times when women instigated the riotous behaviour themselves (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 146).

The woman-on-top trope is part of the pressure valve of carnival that serves to release tensions and return the "natural" hierarchical order, but Zemon-Davis also sees more ambiguous meanings in this paradigm. In literature she finds a 'rich treatment of women who are happily given over to the sway of their bodily senses' (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 134). Bakhtin would refer to this as the lower bodily stratum. Examples such as the Wife of Bath or Rabelais' Gargamelle are cited (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 134), though Zemon-Davis fails to point out that

both of these characters were authored by men, of course they could have been inspired to create these characters based upon real ludic and lusty women of the time. Secondly, she finds comic treatments of woman allowed 'a temporary period of dominion, which is ended only after she has said or done something to undermine authority or denounce its abuse' (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 135) for example the cross-dressing Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The third ambiguity of the woman-on-top trope in medieval culture was the woman allowed 'license to be a social critic' (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 136). Zemon-Davis gives the example of Erasmus's female Folly. So it is clear that the image of the woman had transgressive power in medieval culture that did not solely serve to uphold the established order.

Van Gennep's model of ritual culture in tribal societies consists of a three stage process; separation, liminal period and re-assimilation referring to the ritual processes of rites of passage ceremonies and birth and death rites. In Turner's paradigm liminality is the manifestation of communitas in culture (and I consider communitas more closely in the following section). In defining the liminal space, Turner sought to 'gaze upon interstices which 'provide homes for anti-structural visions, thoughts and ultimately behaviours'' (St John, 1999, 35). It seems that, for Turner, the liminal is synonymous with subversion, allowing for 'meta-explorations beyond, beneath and between the fixed, the finished and the predictable' (St John, 1999, 35). Turner termed this activity 'ludic' because of the spontaneous and undirected playfulness that became possible in the liminal space. Turner defined the liminal as a 'realm of pure possibility [...] where the familiar may be stripped of its certitude and conventional economics and politics transcended' (St John, 1999, 35). This figuration of human inter-relation as moving between structure and communitas with liminality as the pivot can be likened to Butler's fixed and fluid figurations of gender that are discussed in the chapter on the female performer.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin identifies three traits of carnival laughter; festive laughter or the laughter of all the people; universal, which is directed at all and everyone, including the participants and ambivalent laughter that 'asserts and denies, it buries and revives' (Bakhtin, 1984, 11-12). According to Bakhtin, laughter conjures grotesque realism where it 'degrades and materialises [...] lowering all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' (Bakhtin, 1984, 18-20). Bakhtin allies this grotesque realism through laughter with creation as well as the feminine when he says 'grotesque realism knows no other lower level, it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving' (Bakhtin, 1984, 21). He sees this ambivalent laughter of the ludic play space/time of carnival as a regenerative force (Bakhtin, 1984, 21) and the grotesquery that emerges in the moment of this bold, carnival laughter 'reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming' (Bakhtin, 1984, 24). This carnival space/time is now and co-

creative, full of potent subversiveness in its ambivalence. For Bakhtin, 'classical' aesthetics are fixed and complete. In contrast the grotesque aesthetic is emergent and becoming (Bakhtin, 1984, 25). This notion makes Bakhtin a potent theorist for examining emergent and becoming culture. Again, in theorising the classical body Bakhtin aligns it with the individuated body, discrete and separate (Bakhtin, 1984, 29) whereas the grotesque body is the 'ever unfinished, ever creating body (Bakhtin, 1984, 26) in the same way that the de-individuated, co-creating improvising body is. Grotesque humour is folk humour, of the people, unlicensed (Bakhtin, 1984, 31).

Bakhtin calls into being the subversive and transformative nature of the playful carnival; 'this carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists and to enter a completely new order of things' (1984, 34). Bakhtin even identifies a playful madness, unpathologised, de-individuated, as distinct from a lonely, personal, pathological madness:

> The theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by 'normal', that is by commonplace ideas and judgements. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official 'truth'. It is a "festive" madness. In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber [sic], tragic aspect of individual isolation.
>
> (Bakhtin, 1984, 39)

2.4 Liminal Ludic **Communitas**

Turner's project is to 'attempt to comprehend how socio-cultural systems [...] are produced and reproduced' (St John, 1999, 35) through two models; structure and communitas which can also be figured as culture and subculture:

> This second model of human interrelatedness, communitas, has a number of cultural manifestations, of which liminality is only one. The two other manifestations that Turner mentions are marginality and inferiority. To express the relationship of these manifestations to social structure in spatial terms, they are in between (liminality), on the edges (marginality), and beneath (inferiority). As an example of communitas in modern western society, he cites the "beat generation," the "hippies," and the "teeny-boppers." According to Turner, these have opted out of the social structure and chosen to manifest communitas through inferiority. For example, the hippy attitude toward sex is that it is an instrument of communitas rather than a means of forming structural bonds (that is, through marriage).
>
> (La Shure, 2005)

Turner positions liminality and communitas as anti-structural which is defined as 'the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles,

and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation etc., or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as class, caste, sex or age-division' (Turner, 1982, 45). In short, Turner posits that the anti-structural turn of liminality and communitas gets 'practitioners' off the 'normative hook' (Turner, 1982, 45) and he points to society's revolutions and revolutionary phases as liminal, anti-structural turns. For Turner, communitas is 'human interrelatedness' (Turner, 1982, 45) and he asks 'has it any reality base, or is it a persistent fantasy of mankind, a sort of collective return to the womb?' (Turner, 1982, 45). Apparently not, as for Turner, the distinction between communion and communitas is that communitas does not imply a loss of self to some pre-birth spiritual realm but 'communitas preserves individual distinctiveness' (Turner, 1982, 45). This accords with my proposal that impro 'de-individuates' (see page 154), the difference being that de-individuation can be defined as individuals working together for a common aim, difference in relation, therefore preserving individual distinctiveness as Turner posits above. This has echoes with Gayatri Spivak's method of strategic essentialism (see page 70).

Turner ascribes a necessary altruism to the mode of communitas where, despite an individually freely chosen goal, that goal is common and moved towards without 'the expectation of a reaction that satisfies their interests' (Turner, 1982, 46). This is a key tenet of improvisation, 'make you partner look good', 'give your partner a good time' and 'what does the scene need?' thus prompting improvisers to stop protecting their egos and focussing on themselves and their own glory in a scene and rather tune themselves into the other improvisers they are working with and the activities that they enjoy. This also means that, if engaged fully as a principle of improvisation, there can be nothing wrong onstage. If an improviser's partner makes an 'error' and the improviser 'yes-ands' (accepts and builds upon) the error then it cannot be wrong.

Turner proposes that in post-industrial societies the primary liminal spaces in which to experience communitas are within leisure or art, both of which he classifies as ludic (Turner, 1982, 46). However he cautions that the destructive phase of the liminal in post-industrial societies can be extreme and is often celebrated (Turner, 1982, 46) as can be seen in extreme sports, violent computer games, pornography, horror films. This is the abject face of the liminal and ludic. The creative, socially-positive liminal phase conversely presents 'a model of human society as a homogenous, unstructured communitas, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species (Turner, 1982, 47). Acknowledging the universalising principles evident here (which are anathemas to a post-modern relativistic ideology), Turner brings this into the realm of the feelings and especially the experience of the feeling of unity or one-ness that is the telos of mysticism and the spiritual (Weightman, 2000).

Turner also states; 'when even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if for a flash, to be one. Feeling generalises more readily than thought, it would seem' (Turner, 1982, 47). But the ability to maintain or capture this feeling of unity is compromised and this according to Turner is the paradox of communitas; 'the *experience* of communitas becomes the *memory* of communitas, with the result that communitas itself in striving to replicate itself historically develops a social structure, in which initially free and innovative relationships between individuals are converted into norm-governed relationships between social *personae* [emphases in original]' (Turner, 1982, 47). So according to Turner there is always a drive to liminal and ludic activities that engender communitas, like a bottom-weighted toy the forms will always revert to socio-structural norms because 'communitas does not represent the erasure of structural norms from the consciousness of those participating in it' instead it could represent 'the abrogation, negation or inversion of the normative structure' (Turner, 1982, 47). The readiness of communitas 'to convert to normative structure indicates its vulnerability to the structural environment' (Turner, 1982, 47) but also this function makes communitas a less totalising utopian ideal at once far removed from reality and perhaps makes it a more useful tool for questioning structural norms and the status quos of the dominant culture. Rather than an idealistic solution it becomes a useful strategy for the 'other' and allows individuation to exist within the same space-time as the communal in a holistic harmony of 'de-individuation' (as defined above) rather than a dualistic separation of either/or or a hierarchical relationship between the two.

Turner divides his concept of communitas into the distinct forms of spontaneous, ideological and normative. Spontaneous communitas places a high value on personal honesty, openness and lack of pretension as well as the act of relating in the here-and-now in order to obtain a 'flash of mutual understanding on the existential level [which] has something magical about it' (Turner, 1982, 47-8) but is ephemeral. In ideological communitas Turner finds a retrospective examination of the experience of communitas and, so, much like within this thesis, it is an 'attempt to construct a model that could replicate in words his concrete experience of spontaneous communitas' (Turner, 1982, 48). This potentially (dangerously, perhaps) becomes a "utopian" ideal that can be seen in 'many of the world's literate, historical religions' (Turner, 1982, 49), for example. According to Turner an exemplar of normative communitas arises during times of religious revival when something that starts as a charismatic and personal moment becomes a group's dominant social mode and turns into a repetitive social system (Turner, 1982, 49).

Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter, or folk humour, is necessarily communal. Of this form, at odds with the dominant order, he states:

> In the framework of class and feudal political structure this specific character could be realised without distortion only in the carnival, and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who, for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance.
> (Bakhtin, 1984, 9)

Communitas is a useful idea to relate to improvised performance because, as Brad Fortier points out, in *Long Form Improvisation* (2010), 'one of the main factors in performing improvisational theatre is an inexplicable sense of community, often termed "group mind", which is achieved during performance' (Fortier, 2010, 18). Fortier proposes that this sense is also shared with the audience, moving 'the audience and performers from being relative outsiders to insiders who share a common experience and references through the collective construction of the spectacle' (Fortier, 2010, 18). This all adds to the intellectual and emotional high experienced by practitioners of impro performances and Fortier finds communitas a useful idea to help explain what is happening here. It is the co-creation in the moment of delivery, the seat-of-the-pants risk, that the performers and audience are experiencing communitas from and that is why this sense differs from the experience of watching scripted, pre-planned theatre. For Fortier communitas arises from 'the interaction of an ensemble of improvisers who are fully engaged in agreeing to and heightening multiple levels of relationship, character, narrative, mime, and theme in the course of a long-form improvised performance' (Fortier, 2010, 29).

2.5 Summary

Here I have provided the foundation for the development of the phrase 'liminal ludic communitas' by examining the relevant literature. This has included Turner's notions of the seriousness of human play discovered through a comparison between pre- and post-industrial societies' varied approaches to work and play. Also the liminal time and space of ritual activity and ideas around the communal aspects of societal life. I have also examined Broadhurst's aesthetic of liminal performance, developed from Turner, where certain performances are shown to create a marginal space of fluid creative potential. Bakhtin's trope, the carnivalesque, also encapsulates a rarified space and time of communal play in that this is the term he gives for the world-upside-down period of medieval folk culture as it manifests in cultural forms. And Zemon-Davis develops woman as carnivalesque other in the form of the unruly woman-on-top. Impro is the cultural form I am applying this carnivalesque notion of liminal ludic communitas to here. The combination of the liminal, the ludic and communitas will be used to describe and evaluate the 'inexplicable' that Fortier identifies above in relation to female live experience of

the practice of impro of my interviewees. In the next chapter I articulate further the notion of woman as 'other' and examine feminist constructions of female identity.

Chapter Three In Theory; The Particularities of the Female Performer or; 'Women who embody their politics on stage' (Goodman, 1998, 15)

3.1 Introduction

The central concern of this chapter is to ask whether women, by way of their socially, historically and culturally formed gender, embody resistance and subjugated knowledge on stage. From the agency of avant-garde performance art to the (potential) exploitation of pornography is the use of the female body inherently political due to its contested and colonised position as 'other' in the history of culture? In other words does the female gendered performer still contain the potential for subversion when made visible through the spectacle of performance? Lizbeth Goodman states; 'Part of the process of studying 'gender and performance' is to recognise the fluidity of these terms' (Goodman, 1998, 6). The terms are fluid across cultures, times, places and schools of thought as well as individuals. The specificity of the area of study in question here is that of western canonical and marginal theatrical performance mainly over the twentieth century, touching on women performing before that time and moving towards the specific context of the contemporary female improvisers interviewed for this study as well as my own experience of being a female improviser. This chapter seeks to frame 'gender and performance' in terms that are, while fluid, relevant to the focus of the study through an engagement with feminist literature, performance literature and literature on gender in performance. To begin, it is necessary to define what is meant by the broad term 'performance'.

Marvin Carlson's *Performance* (1996) offers definitions and parameters for the amorphous category "performance". His stance is overwhelmingly Amerocentric. He even claims the inception of "performance art" for the US, apparently blind to the early twentieth century work of avante-gardists such as Oskar Schlemmer[5] (Bial, 2004, 71). In fact it could be argued that the actions of the National Socialist Party in Germany in the 1930s and the events of the Second World War seeded the fertilisation of art in America through the creation of a diaspora of creative artists. Certainly the history of modern dance in America can be traced directly back to the Korpurkultur[6] of the intensely creative inter-war period in Germany

[5] 1888-1943 A visual artist of the Bauhaus movement whose Triadic Ballet explored the figure in space in a cutting edge theatrical manner (Trimingham, 2002).

[6] A German portmanteau meaning a culture of the body and referring to an inter-war notion in Germany that it was through the perfection of the body one could achieve a perfect state of being (Toepfer, 1997). This body culture covered naturism, gymnastics and performance arts such as Ausdruckstanz (or dance of expression).

through the influence of Mary Wigman[7] on Martha Graham[8], for example. These nationalistic ownerships of cultural developments, however, are a product of the application of capital economy, production, authorship, ownership and control patterns onto the ephemeral culture of performance. This is what the performance artists of the 1970s were attempting to break away from. Carlson, who offers an important overview of performance despite the ethnocentricity of his work, claims that this began in conjunction with the performative acts of resistance of the women's movement during that infamous year of civil unrest and protest, 1968 (Carlson, 1996, 165). He states, 'by the end of the 1980s there was wide-spread interest among feminist performers and theorists internationally in the questioning, the exposing, and perhaps even the dismantling of those cultural and social constructions and assumptions that governed traditional gender roles, stagings of the body, and gender performance, both on the stage and in everyday life' (Carlson, 1996, 167). Carlson imbues the activity of performing with great subversive potential, but not the endorsed performance of the centre – the canon – only the performance of the liminal margins or the subaltern. For example, Carlson cites Michelene Wandor:

> The "vivid visual imagery of the early street theatre, with its spontaneity and its attack on stereotypical 'feminine' imagery", gave way in the mid-1970s to a "theatre of argument" attempting to "reclaim the experience of women and gays" from the "conventional priorities of male heterosexual experience", including its class perspective. Finally, in a third phase, some of the early spontaneity returned, but in a different context: "instead of using dressing-up and visual imagery to challenge the audience's assumptions about real-life oppression, the new spontaneity revolved around an examination of the way the theatrical forms themselves work to represent sexuality".
>
> (Carlson, 1996, 167)

So eventually the very structures of performance itself come under deconstructive scrutiny through performance art. This defines performance as subversive and allied with strategies of resistance (Foucault), making vocal subjugated knowledges and/or as revelatory of dominant tropes. These structures are somewhat uncovered in Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1989). Following John Berger's paradigm that 'looking' is 'masculine' and 'being looked at' is 'feminine' (cited in Garraghan, 1999, 159), inferring that 'looking' is a dominant activity and 'being looked at' is submissive, Mulvey set a precedent for analyzing the relationship between the female on screen and the gazing (male) spectator. Mulvey's theory takes as its parameters for analysis a psychoanalytical approach to the male viewer of mainstream narrative film and makes the assumption that spectatorship is both active and masculine. This theory has been appropriated, applied and critiqued by many

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[7] 1886-1973 German practitioner of Ausdruckstanz, choreographer of the opening ceremony of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

[8] 1894-1991 American modern dance choreographer.

performance/theatre theorists and practitioners (Garraghan, 1999; Dodds, 1997; Briginshaw, 2001; Daly, 2001; Willson, 2008).

3.2 The Male Gaze

Mulvey's seminal, oft-criticised and contested critique of the image of woman on film within a hetero-patriarchal paradigm offers a pivotal point between the complex historical site of the exhibited female form as performance/spectacle and the more ambiguous multivalent performing woman of recent history and current practice. Following on from Berger's paradigm, above, Mulvey sets a precedent for analysing the relationship between the female on screen and the gazing spectator. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1989) takes as its parameters for analysis a psychoanalytical approach to the male viewer of mainstream narrative film and makes the assumption that spectatorship is both active and conventionally masculine. Mulvey takes Freud's notion of scopophilia, or pleasurable looking, and identifies two ways in which the male viewer will engage erotically with a film; 'the first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, [scopophilia] developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen' (Mulvey, 1989, 18). She only takes into account a heterosexual male gaze. In a later essay she claims that this is because the act of "looking at" is masculine and the act of "being looked at" is feminine, in line with Berger's assertion. She states; 'in-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as 'point of view'; a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third person' (Mulvey, 1989, 29) thereby entrenching her analysis in a phallic economy that she argues informs culture and language to such an extent as to be intrinsic. But this is not a strong enough argument for the claim that men look and women are looked at. Even if the quality of looking is phallic, this is only one quality of looking. It could be argued for example that the exchange of gaze between a mother and baby is beyond this phallic construction of the gaze. This gaze is figured by Bracha Ettinger as the 'matrixial gaze' and could be seen as the gaze between the infant and mother while nursing. Ettinger states; 'the matrixial gaze thrills us while fragmenting, scattering and joining grains together, turning us into participatory witnesses' (*The Matrixial Borderspace*, 2006, 117). When the assumption is made, however, that everything springs from the primary signifier of the phallus then it is hard to step outside of the paradigm to see (or look) in other ways. The fact that Mulvey starts her analysis from a position of Freudian psychotherapy means that it would be very hard for her to step outside of the phallic paradigm and so she fails to account for a female erotic gaze or queer viewing positions, let alone a non-erotic way of engaging with a cultural text.

Mulvey employs psychoanalytical approaches to analyse the erotic visual pleasure aroused in the male viewer when watching mainstream narrative cinema. The first is scopophilia, or pleasurable looking. This is a Freudian notion; Mulvey states that Freud; 'associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects and submitting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (Mulvey, 1989, 16) She defines this as active and aligns it with voyeurism and sexual/erotic pleasure. She then adopts the Lacanian notion of 'the mirror phase' to develop scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. She states, 'here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition' (Mulvey, 1989, 17). This is how she accounts for the identification of the male spectator with the male protagonist; a recognition of him as similar and a vicarious enjoyment of his exploits and heroic status and also his relationship with the object of desire, or the female on screen. In her analysis she seeks to explain the loss of self that can happen when watching a film where identification with the characters on screen can be so complete as to lose oneself in the action. Her assertion that this happens to the male spectator through identification with the male protagonist is limited and fails to account for female and other modes of spectatorship, and the ability of female and other characters to illicit the same response. In her later article, *Afterthoughts on* 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1999), she speaks of how this paradigm of the gaze can be interrupted in the female spectator 'it is always possible that the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its 'masculinisation', that the spell of fascination is broken' (Mulvey, 1999, 129).

Mulvey was writing in the 1970s using Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to support her film theory. Since then, much of what Freud and Lacan set out has been reconfigured as operating through the phallic at best and misogynistic at worst. By concretising the Platonic view of the female as inferior male in his castration theories Freud puts women at an inherent disadvantage. And Lacan's notion that the unconscious is structured as a language places all subject constructs firmly within the order of the logos (historically associated with male power, the power of the word). Psychoanalysis is a potentially problematic model to apply wholesale and uncritically to a feminist analysis of a text because of its androcentric heritage. Even before Mulvey was writing the criticism of Freud in particular was emerging. Fiona Tolan writes, Freud 'had been widely discredited by early second wave feminists [...] [they] had persuasively argued that Freudian theory worked to perpetuate sexual difference and reinforce the belief that inferiority was an inherent quality of the female' (Tolan, 2006, 333).

Mulvey's argument in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* does not allow for any intelligence on the part of the viewer, or any active choice in the meanings that are brought to

bear upon the filmic text that is presented. The Mulveyan viewer is a passive (even when in the active mode of scopophilia) male who can only relate to the male protagonist on screen and through him find erotic gratification in the female. This gives no credit to the filmmaker or the cinema-goer for the creative interchange between the two at the point of the viewing of the film. She has made no allowance for Kristeva's theories on intertextuality, Derrida's claim there is never just one meaning or Barthes' notion of the end of the authoritative creative voice dictating to the audience what meanings they will find. Bakhtin's notion of Dialogism encompasses all these angles. As Stam states, 'his concept of dialogism, of language and discourse as "shared territory", inoculates us from the individualist assumptions undergirding romantic theories of art while still allowing us to be attuned to the specific ways in which artists orchestrate diverse social voices' (Stam, 1989, 237).

In her essay, Mulvey articulates two contradictory aspects of the gaze; 'one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the 'other' demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like' (Mulvey, 1989, 18). This is a binary logic, and binary logics are always appealing in their neatness and completeness, but reality, and the reality of the multiplicity of the gaze, is much more complicated and messy than Mulvey's binary allows. She applies her straightforward binary logic to the position of woman in film and uses it to place woman as object of both desire and repulsion through the Freudian notion of woman as castrated 'other' who imbues both fear (fear of castration) and desire (oedipal) in the male subject. Thus she assumes a phallogocentric ordering of the world . Mulvey critiques the cinema as eroticising the image of the woman. She reinforces this by stating that there is a clear division of labour in the cinematic text and that, according to this, man cannot 'bear the burden of sexual objectification' (Mulvey, 1989, 20) because 'man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like' (Mulvey, 1989, 20). This is Mulvey's most blatant omission of 'other' gazes, i.e. homosexual and the erotic female gaze. In a massive oversimplification, she states that man advances the narrative as an active protagonist where woman fulfils the role of desired spectacle. This aspect is further complicated in an improvised diegesis because the positions and roles of male and female are produced in the moment and depend greatly on the personalities of the players involved. As Knowles asserted (Chapter One, page 12) our spontaneously improvised actions tend to be culturally affirmative, supporting dominant values, though culture is certainly more fragmented than Mulvey allows for.

'There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation there is pleasure in being looked at' (Mulvey, 1989,16). Here, Mulvey glosses quickly over the notion of pleasure in being looked at that subjects (male, female,

heterosexual, queer) may enjoy playing with, as this does not serve her argument that women are objectified through the controlling gaze of the spectator (where this is turned upside down is in the pleasure, particularly, of the returned gaze between spectator and performer when the fourth wall is broken). Ettinger writes, 'We look for the gaze, we long for it, we desire to be looked at by the gaze' (Ettinger, 2006, 42). The film text is not solely a product of a patriarchal conspiracy to enforce women into the position of sexual objects for male gratification. Mulvey's glossing over of the free desire for the gaze dismisses the possibility that women possess agency, the ability to make intelligent choices, desire and take pleasure in being looked at and, therefore, she reinforces patriarchal stereotypes. The possibility of the returned gaze present in live performance from performer to spectator, as well as creating a more engaging performance, is a strategy available to female performers in order to disrupt the male gaze. Pamela Robertson argues, in *Guilty Pleasures* (1996), that the female performer is empowered by her 'awareness of her own awarishness' (Robertson, 1996, 28). There is a certain pleasure to be found in this empowerment.

Mulvey's analysis focuses on the visual pleasure of watching cinema. This automatically aligns the cinema text with the androcentric order where the visual rules. Rosi Braidotti criticises such positions in her treatise on nomadic subjectivity when she says, 'psychoanalytic theory, which in many respects criticises classical theories of representation, confirms the primacy of sight as a site of legitimation of knowledge: Lacan's mirror stage perpetuates the tyranny of the logocentric gaze' (Braidotti, 1994, 71). It does seem strange that Mulvey's feminist film criticism would employ a psychoanalytic theme that privileges sight above all the senses, the sense that has traditionally been aligned with the male. Scopophilia is not the only pleasure available to cinema spectators or spectators of performance. The spectator is also listening to the aural elements of the film and being affected in many other ways (goosebumps, laughter, tears, shock) by the text. To reduce the experience to mere sight is to limit the possibilities of analysing cultural texts, particularly from a feminist perspective.

Pamela Robertson, however, in her treatise on female camp (1996), argues for the foundational quality of Mulvey's critique when she states that Mulvey prompts feminist scholars to:

> (1) rescue some forms of pleasure for the female viewer; (2) conceptualise spectatorship as a process mediating between the textually constructed "female spectator" and the female audience constructed by socio-historical categories of gender, class, and race; and (3) rethink ideas of ideology, resistance, and subversion.
>
> (Robertson, 1996, 13-14)

This is why Mulvey acts as a foundation stone in this exploration of female performance and spectacle. Mulvey posits that it is the patriarchal unconscious (as described by Freud and Lacan) that has structured mainstream cinema (and by extension other cultural texts where the female body is a focus) designing it so that the visual pleasure and narrative journey is specifically for the pleasure of the male heterosexual viewer, playing to an inherent narcissism via identification with a male protagonist who mediates the male spectator's gaze upon the female object, providing erotic pleasure. This can then give the male viewer a castration anxiety as he gazes upon the 'other' that lacks a penis, or a sense of desire which can then be 'eased by visual and narrative operations of fetishism and sadism' (Straager, 1995, 45). Mulvey analyses from a limited spectatorial position by deploying a limited psychoanalytical framework from a limited position of compulsory heterosexuality and fixed polarised gender positions and, therefore, her analysis is of limited relevance to the analysis of cultural texts in a multicultural, multi-sexual, poly-textual, polyvocal, heteroglossic and postmodern world. However, her investigation has paved the way for scholars of all performance categories to examine the female performing body from a feminist perspective. It is clear that other theoretical positions must also be brought into play in order to assess the subversive possibilities for the marginal female body in improvised performance.

3.3 The Female Body in Performance

Here I will look at the female body in performance and the problem of being the object of a dominant gaze. The dancing female body is ideal for this examination as it is the ultimate silent body display and spectacle. Ann Daly's analysis of George Balanchine's[9] choreography from a feminist perspective invokes theories of the male gaze that are synonymous with Mulvey's and derive explicitly from film theory. She shows that this way of looking at modern American ballet is 'rooted in an ideology that denies women their agency [...] classical ballet portrays women as objects of male desire rather than as agents of their own desire' (Daly, 2002, 286). Daly asks if women could ever find a representational agency in the form of classical ballet while 'woman as the to-be-looked-at Other remains the norm' (Daly, 2002, 287). She goes on to say that Martha Graham's early works 'created a radical vision of strength for women, but today's modern dance is just as gender-dichotomised as ballet. A totally new way of dancing and choreographic form – if that is possible to imagine within the framework of patriarchy – is needed in order to encode a gender-multiple dance' (Daly, 2002, 287). Although I am uncomfortable with Daly's 'gender-multiple' phrase, due to its ambiguity, I acknowledge the sentiment. Daly realises that in order for this to happen the socially encoded nature of ballet as a dominant cultural institution needs to be deconstructed.

[9] 1904-1983 choreographer for the New York City Ballet

In another essay, Daly reiterates the importance of dance scholarship to the study of gender because dance is an embodied form and the body is where 'the discourses of the "natural" and the "cultural" thrash it out' (Daly, 2002, 294). In this essay she is beginning to articulate further the need for an alternative to the theory of the male gaze (Daly, 2002, 297) and is asking how the contiguous presence of the performer and spectator can alter the gaze (as opposed to the spectator of the film text who is not present with the performers). She argues against the use of the theory of the male gaze for dance analysis because it has arisen from film theory, and the experiences of watching film and live dance are fundamentally different. She says, 'in film the woman performer is literally a celluloid object. She has no presence in the movie theater; she cannot look back at the spectator and is thus rendered passive. In dance the situation is not as clear-cut' (Daly, 2002, 297)[10]. Daly does usefully go on to say that the dancer:

> Becomes part of a dense thicket of completely familiar codes and conventions that conspire to position her/him as the willing object of desire. We need to face squarely the risk factor in trying to jam those conventions: much of the beauty and pleasure of dance as we know them are tied up with the erotics of display and spectatorship.
>
> (Daly, 2002, 297)

Here Daly is asking us not to 'throw the baby out with the bath water' which aligns with Emilyn Claid's notions of seductive relations between the performer and spectator (2008). Switching these relations off can be counter-productive. Knowing how to play with, and manipulate them can be empowering for the female performer. In a paper on Isadora Duncan, Daly finally lays the 'male gaze' concept as a useful analytic tool to rest when she states:

> It has been clear that the logic of binary opposition and its corollaries – the singular subject and the male gaze – though they have been crucial in understanding how the present system works, are not terribly useful in advancing beyond the problem; for, if patriarchy were truly so monolithic, then there would be no room in it for a feminist subject. And, seductive as they are, utopian visions of a world "elsewhere" are cultural and theoretical impossibilities [...] the male gaze theory forces the feminist dance scholar into a no-win situation that turns on exceedingly unproductive "succeed or fail" criterion.
>
> (Daly, 2002, 306-7)

This double bind of performance having to either reify or criticise "normalising" gender relations removes any sense of play and ambiguity from the creation and reception of embodied performance and is itself part of a binary system of either/or that is not useful for a project of queering and blurring fixed gender categories. In terms of impro, it is the untangling

[10] I would argue that in film it is not clear cut either, but there is no space for that argument here as this is not a thesis on film theory.

of those moments of stereotyped gender and queered gender roles that is of interest to me in this research. Perhaps the in-the-moment reflection of real life available to improvising performers most effectively reproduces the reality of lived embodiment of gender i.e. there are times when I reinforce gender stereotypes through my actions as a woman and times when I subvert them **in real life** as well as on stage.

Daly cites Mulvey's own criticism of her Visual Pleasure narrative and also cites her 'emphasis on the carnival as a ludic space' as one of a number of emerging feminist theories of representation that may be more helpful to feminist analyses of embodied performance (Daly, 2002, 307). This appropriation of carnival occurs in Mulvey's essay *Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience*, a paper from a 1983 conference. In this paper she is deconstructing the binary, phallic and oedipal logic that controls and polices behaviour and representation and in doing so she invokes Bakhtin's notion of carnival and:

> The difficulty of envisaging change from within the conceptual framework of a polarised mythology. It is crucial to this structure that the carnivalesque ludic space, in which the Law allows its own injustice to be represented in a period of controlled disorder, is constructed primarily around rituals of inversion that can very easily be reversed back into 'order' at the end of the day.
>
> (Daly, 2002, 168)

She wonders though if:

> The gestures, emblems and metaphors of carnivalesque ritual can provide an almost invisible breeding ground for a language of protest and resistance. Inversion has a central place in the history of transgression within the law, but it is neither the only ritual of carnival, nor is it necessarily simply reversible back into the order of everyday.
>
> (Daly, 2002, 169)

Natalie Zemon-Davis (invoked by Mulvey) also argues that the carnivalesque and in particular the figure of the disorderly woman can both re-establish and undermine the dominant order:

> The image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen the behavioural options for women within and even outside marriage, and second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over the basic distribution of power in a society. The woman-on-top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behaviour.
>
> (Zemon-Davis, 1975, 131)

The disorderly woman is still a potent force but for the female being looked at is still a problem because of the oppositional binary figuring of male or female gender identity.

Sherril Dodds refers to Mulvey's Visual Pleasure essay in *Dance and Erotica* (1997), an ethnographic study of the construction of the female stripper. It would be easy to apply the notion of active male scopophilia and passive female objectification in this circumstance, but Dodds cautions that 'it is perhaps too simplistic to see the strippers as completely passive. After all, the very act of dancing to incite sexual pleasure in the spectator suggests and element of 'activity'' (Dodds, 1997, 225-6) and perhaps, though Dodds does not go this far, control and agency, even power. However, Christy Adair asserts that:

> The hierarchical structure within which roles are located means that it is difficult for women to appropriate 'the gaze' and 'the look'. Women cannot appropriate power by simply reversing these roles. Often there is an element of punishment for women who do break the rules and take the power of 'looking'.
>
> (Adair, 1992, 77)

Some of the performance artists that Jackie Willson examines in her book, *The Happy Stripper; Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (2008) have taken the appropriation of the male gaze to an extreme, artists such a Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle whose work deals explicitly with pornography and the scatological. Willson argues that these artists tackled the problem of representation by re-presenting 'themselves through the very same images cultivated by patriarchal culture [...] Artists were challenging the disempowered image of woman's passive 'to-be-looked-at-ness' seeking to reverse, challenge and make blatant this power relation' (Willson, 2008, 59). Any ensuing punishment (by critics or audiences) is probably seen as a victory by these artists whose intention is to provoke debate and anger. Willson does deconstruct this dilemma of the abject female body in performance art and finds that it is almost impossible to fall into either the 'disempowering' or the 'challenging' camp and she asks if women should really be asking 'why do (straight) women not ever make work about men they desire? Is there such a thing as a female heterosexual gaze?' (Willson, 2008, 62).

In a response to the many criticisms of *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey states in the later *Afterthoughts*:

> There is a sense in which this argument [...] hinders the possibility of change and remains caught ultimately within its own dualistic terms. The polarisation only allows an "either/or". As the two terms (masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/ exhibitionist, active/passive) remain dependent on each other for meaning, their

> only possible movement is into inversion. They cannot be shifted easily into new phase or new significance. There can be no space outside such a pairing.
> (Mulvey, 1999, 162)

This accords with Judith Butler's project of fluid gender and gender performativity which attempts to take the feminist project out of dichotomous wranglings of second wave feminism and into a phase of complex and individual subjectivity where gender is not biologically determined, but understood as socially done and undone.

Mulvey's invocation of Freud and Lacan is problematic for a study of the female body in performance. As Carlson states:

> Feminist theorists have found in Freud and Lacan the most fully developed model for the establishment of the dominant male subject in the patriarchal cultural system [...] Traditional [sic] theatre and visual art are based on [Freudian and Lacanian] system[s of] assuming a male spectator and offering, the female as "other", the object of the male's desiring gaze.
> (Carlson, 1996, 168)

This 'other' can be expanded to include all 'others' outside the primacy of dominant, white, male, healthy, wealthy and heterosexual and this desiring gaze of the phallic economy mutates into a controlling gaze whose object of sight variously compounds 'his' privileged position in the capitalist economy. Hence even 'desire' can be founded in an economy of power and control, or at least sanctioned desire can, for the desire of and for the 'other' is still suffused with radical and subversive possibilities and, therefore, must be policed through means such as binary hierarchical categories.

3.4 Troubling Gender's Binary Biology

In this section the binary opposition of gender will be challenged through the invocation of other feminist theorists who see gender as fluid, interchangeable and malleable. These theorists will be made to talk to each other and are critiqued and assessed for their usefulness in analysing the female performer.

On the surface Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, Bracha Ettinger and Donna Haraway's theories on gender, unlike Mulvey's, seek to undo the hierarchical binary categorisations of sex, sex relations and sexual division of labour that has historically been the basis for self, identity, inter-relationality and politics based, perhaps, on a Kristevan preoccupation with abjection. Butler's notions of performativity have much in common with Braidotti's nomadism, both are seeking an alternative to fixed identity and see fluid mobility and an ontological shift away from essence and truth as ways to achieve this. Haraway also desires a 'theoretical and practical struggle against unity-through-domination or unity through incorporation' (Haraway,

1991, 157) because this not only destabilises androcentric '-isms', but 'all claims for an organic or natural standpoint' (Haraway, 1991, 157). All three have created alternative figurations as a way of thinking themselves free from an 'original' ontology. And these figurations share similarities. They represent multiples; Butler, multiple positions of identity; Braidotti, multiple identities within one body (lived or political); Haraway, multiple electronic and biological interconnections and affinities within and between individuals. Figuring identity as multiple in these ways seems to be a logical postmodern step, a way of making sense of fragmentation as an opportunity for the political emancipation of subjugated 'others' and knowledges. I will demonstrate later that it is perhaps Bracha Ettinger who has managed to complete the project of re-thinking subjectivity in a way that enables a feminine ontology that is least problematic.

What is more interesting in the reading of these three theories is not the similarities (affinities) as these are to be expected in almost any feminist ontology, but the differences between them. On the one hand it could be argued that these differences are divisive to the political project of liberating woman from her traditional identity, whereas on the other hand the project of liberation could be said to be encapsulated by the term 'difference'. It is at this point that Butler and Braidotti diverge, for despite giving lip service to the idea of difference, Butler's project seems to seek to iron out and absorb those qualities that could be said to be feminine by actively seeking their availability for appropriation or 'gender-bending'. If there is no fixed male or female gender then the possibilities for creating and reading gendered activity become infinite. Accepting performative gender as the model enables the transcendence of binaries, existence beyond biological constraints and the obsolescence of sexual division of labour. Somehow though some of the complexity of existence is lost and the danger is that the reigning gender qualities can absorb and subsume the 'other' qualities and masculine becomes the only identity – or some chimeric mixture of masculine and feminine that has the potential to be utterly meaningless in terms of identity. Thereby strengthening the phallic economy that some performance art is attempting to deconstruct, both thematically and methodologically.

Nomadic subjectivity celebrates difference, commonality and relationship, echoing Bakhtin's Dialogism and Carnivalesque. Gender performativity celebrates similarity, neutrality and androgynisation. In Butler's imagined matrix, the categories of 'man' and 'woman' fragment repeatedly, splintering. It is a matrix of selfish identity with no need to seek out the elusive similarities that engender solidarity between overlapping and liminal categories. Whilst echoing Ettinger's matrixial, it does not allow for her concept of 'severality' or maintaining multiple identities or roles at once. Within this maelstrom, the signifiers of difference are diluted and lost forever and the subaltern subject is alone in his/her unique needs as a unique entity. In Braidotti's paradigm, difference becomes the dominant sign - 'we are all different **and**

the same. Our difference is not problematized but celebrated'. An epistemology of difference becomes the essential positive. The question then is, does the essentialising of difference fix us in binaries because gender/sex is brought sharply into focus, not blended and ironed into irrelevance and obscurity? This is a re-thinking and 'feminising' or 'othering' of the patriarchal ontology to include qualities of affinity, community and communicative being. Butler critiques the idea of 'woman' as a stable and coherent subject (Butler, 1990, 6-7) but she does not see that having a category of 'woman' as stable signifier does not **necessarily** serve to fix women's identity. The signifier can become a stable and coherent container for the rhizomes of different identities that the category of 'woman' overarches. In this refiguring, the splintering and schizophrenic fragmentation that we are at risk of from Butler's figuration of gender can be avoided. The category 'woman' can be a repository for all feminine identities, in the same way a real visceral woman is a repository for her experiences, genealogy, thinking, functions and identities – the epitome of contained difference. Of course, this can only work if the phallogocentric suspicion of difference is re-thought as a positive ontology of identity. Whilst being different from a white, middle-class, healthy, young, sane, male is considered deviant and problematic in the light of the Platonic heritage of western thought, the overarching category of 'woman' can be used as a stick with which to beat 'her' by a hegemonic and despotic minority. However, there is also the danger of replacing a phallic hegemony with a matrixial or gynocentric hegemony, replacing one form of centralised power with another. In practice this merely results in ghettoisation, the phallic economy being too powerful. In terms of performance, then, there is a danger in creating work that fails to touch any audience beyond those already sympathetic to a feminist approach, a danger of any self-consciously 'feminist' performance being too didactic to engage a broad audience and, therefore, condemned to preach to the converted.

Butler states: 'The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms... there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of woman' (Butler, 1990, 2). Braidotti would argue that this is because the three levels of ontological difference are not being applied to the category of 'woman' (see page 91), especially level two – differences between women. The question is how can 'woman' be figured when women are all so different from each other with vastly differing personal and political needs. This question can be addressed through Gayatri Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism where signs of oppressive fixing of identity are appropriated by subaltern subjects temporarily for the purposes of solidarity for political or other ends. Regarding Braidotti, though, we can even go so far as to ask if 'woman' should be referred to as 'category' when categorisation itself is phallogocentrically driven and alien to Braidotti's nomadic feminism. Ettinger succeeds somewhat in manifesting a symbolic beyond categorisation in her work,

though the expression of this through language becomes problematic when the origin and function of the logos is considered (Ettinger finds a way of expression through her visual artistic practice). Braidotti is, however, reluctant to relinquish the signifier – 'woman', she says. 'until we have worked through the multiple layers of signification of Woman – phallic as it may be' (Braidotti, 1994, 171). It seems to me to be eminently sensible not to discard female identity by eliminating sexual difference and, therefore, woman's potential for subversion.

Butler calls for gender to be figured as a fluid performance – moving along a scale between masculine and feminine – so that gender is not fixed biologically and at the site of the body but becomes something that can be performed by any body, in any way they so desire. It seems contradictory to propose an order that does away with "biology as destiny" when much female lived experience is continually returned to the site of biological destiny, the body, with the act of reproduction. Butler's non-biologically determined and fluid gender construction and Haraway's technologised reproduction are fantasies for the majority of embodied women. Women's lived reality is such that, along with fellow subalterns, the loudly performing 'other' body emerges as a mouthpiece for subversion just as, according to McGill, it did among the improvising women of the Sixteenth Century *Commedia dell'Arte* (see pages 20 and 123) This emergence is polyvocal for, as Braidotti declares, 'The female subject of feminism is constructed across a multiplicity of meanings which are often in conflict with one another; therefore the signifier woman is no longer sufficient as the foundational stone of the feminist project' (Braidotti, 1994, 2).

It is a poetic difference between 'woman' as individual embodied subject (me, you, her) and the essential metaphor of 'woman' as a culture that Braidotti is describing. Men are each individuals and each different, but the unified monolithic male culture has developed a life beyond the individual, over centuries of capitalism, to become the phallic hegemony. This monolithic culture seeks to assimilate all other cultures and absorb or vilify difference because united difference develops a strength to rival its own and it fears its own domination in turn. Braidotti, in the chapter *Mothers, Monsters and Machines* (Braidotti, 1994, 213-244) sets out some ideas as to how the relationship between the mother and the son acts as a blueprint for misogyny. In discourse, this begins with Aristotle's positioning of the male body as original and normal and the female body as a deviation or monstrous mutation of that norm. Braidotti suggests that 'in feminist theory one speaks as a woman, although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather a site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables' (Braidotti, 1994, 4). She goes on to suggest that speaking as a woman empowers all women, but what if one woman speaking from her own unique position disempowers, either actively or passively,

another woman's position? This is similar to Spivak's post-colonial feminism. A feminism that reminded the feminists of the west that there were other races whose women were being suppressed not only by the phallic economy, but also by the feminists who were calling for equality based on their own terms and disregarding the lived experiences of non-western women.

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* is a rhetoric calling for a re-figuring of identity as cyborg 'a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seduction to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity' (Haraway, 1991, 150). That is to say, an entity that is purely post-modern, fractured with no origin or history, no essence, almost no meaning, and no stable identity. Her cyborg myth is about 'transgendered boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work' (Haraway, 1991, 154). In addition, she argues for an urgent re-figuring of the feminist project as cyborg, conversely calling for an alternately single-visioned and illusory political unity – androgyny – dressed up in the costume of multiplicity and inclusion.

What becomes of difference when ontology is ironed into neutrality? If I am not a sex-neutral entity, where does my epistemology belong? It seems that plurality is integral to human existence and cannot be shunned for, as there will always be difference, what dichotomy will be constructed when sameness and neutrality are privileged? Braidotti asks 'How can the affirmation of the positivity of difference be combined with the critical analysis of the dominant form of discourse and sexuality' (Braidotti, 1994, 41). 'The alleged overcoming of sexual difference results in the circuiting of the affirmation of the positivity of difference on the part of women. In a cultural order that, for centuries, has been governed by the male homosocial bond, the elimination of sexual difference can only be a one-way street toward the appropriation, elimination or homologation of the feminine in/of women; it is a toy for the boys' (Braidotti, 1994, 54). But 'how can one judge as 'perverse' the myth of the interchangeability of organs, without referring to a naturalistic paradigm?' (Braidotti, 1994, 54) Ettinger's project addresses these issues in an original way, avoiding using the Matrixial to displace the phallic and, therefore, rethinking the symbolic.

In discussing Haraway's post-modernist figuring of cyborg-woman, Braidotti admires the idea of the cyborg as 'reconceptualising the human being as embodied and yet non-unified' (Braidotti, 1994, 106) and 'a figure of interrelationality, receptivity, and global communication that deliberately blurs categorical distinctions...a way of thinking specificity

without falling into relativism...Haraway's representation of a generic feminist humanity; it is her answer to the question of how feminists reconcile the radical historical specificity of women' (Haraway, 1991, 106). As a unifying ideal for feminism, the cyborg at first glance has attractive qualities. I would argue that this is a utopian ideal that does not function at the visceral site of actual bodies. Therefore, the androgynous cyborg is at best a red herring and at worst a dangerous ideal that sets sameness against difference in a battle for supremacy. In her survey and critique of feminism as a personal politics Haraway emphasises the personal nature of feminism and claims that the difficulty of exclusion brought about by naming one's feminism with a single adjective causes fragmentation of a political movement, stating 'there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women' (Haraway, 1991, 155). She highlights the emergence of an alternate response to seeking a unifying identity – affinity (Haraway, 1991, 155). This notion of affinity connects, not only with Bakhtin's Carnivalesque and Dialogism, but also with Ettinger's notion of severality and could potentially be seen to go beyond, or before gender difference without denying or annihilating it.

Affinity can be variously defined as a spontaneous, natural liking or sympathy for someone; similarity of characteristics suggesting a relationship, relationship of marriage rather than blood ties and comes from the Latin for 'related' literally 'to border'. So a feminist politics based on affinity rather than identity would imply a liminal interconnectedness of people who share common characteristics but are sympathetic and tolerant of difference; a community. However, in Bakhtin's similar formulation of an ethics of being he goes beyond gender with I-for-another and another-for-me, this has much in common with one of the tenets of improvisation practice – 'give your partner a good time'. Avoiding categorisation yet upholding difference and specificity is a tall order and a tricky negotiation. This is in apparent opposition to the idea of the featureless (perfectly smooth) cyborg, at odds with Haraway's figuring, unless the cyborg comes to represent the container of difference that shows unity without and shelters the multitude within. In this figuration, cyborg-feminism is in danger of becoming merely a replacement of a phallic economy.

Haraway seeks to build an 'ironic' political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism' (Haraway, 1991, 149). 'The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics [and it is] an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction' (Haraway, 1991, 150). She argues that a cyborg identity might be about 'lived social and bodily realities in which people are [...] not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (Haraway, 1991, 150). It seems that the cyborg is really a modern/futuristic way of describing the carnivalesque, grotesque body, gay relativity and

world-upside-down of Bakhtin's theories, but one that is perhaps more limited in its invocation of 'the machine' and technology.

Braidotti agrees with Haraway's prediction that feminist epistemologies, phallogocentrically framed, have failed in producing 'effective affinities' (Haraway, 1991, 157). Only a re-thought system of irrationality can move us away from the tyranny of a rational, logical politics that has no relevance to many women's lived experience. Haraway's key question asks 'what kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective – and, ironically, socialist-feminist' (Haraway, 1991, 157). As I will discuss soon, I would argue that Ettinger's Matrix and Metramorphosis could possibly answer this question. Haraway goes on to critique Marxist/socialist feminism and Marxism's root purpose of wage-labour analysis and socialist/feminism's expansion of this category to include the unpaid labour of mothers and women-at-home as being too 'pre-eminently western' (Haraway, 1991, 158). She sets this against a picture of radical feminism as a totalising gesture to enforce the unity of women through the 'experience of and testimony to radical non-being' (Haraway, 1991, 159). She argues that both of these political modes have 'simultaneously naturalised and denatured the category 'woman' and consciousness of the social lives of 'women'' (Haraway, 1991, 159).

She summarises; 'if my complaint about socialist/Marxist standpoints is their unintended erasure of polyvocal, unassimilable, radical difference made visible in anti-colonial discourse and practice [radical feminists] intentional erasure of all difference through the device of the 'essential' non-existence of women is not reassuring' (Haraway, 1991, 159). She argues that multiple voices disappear into these genealogy-based politics. But cautions that when we are conscious of totalising as failure we 'risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection. Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. 'Epistemology' is about knowing the difference' (Haraway, 1991, 160-1).

In thinking through her cyborg manifesto, Haraway says:

> The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised are all in question ideologically. The actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination. The home, workplace, market, public arena, the body itself – all can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways with large consequences for women and others.
> (Haraway, 1991, 163)

For women and the other 'others' some kind of containment is needed within which to deposit these proliferated post-modern identities if any form of meaning is to be preserved. That is if it is decided that meaning still has meaning. I would argue that, without some kind of meaning, existence (resistance, perhaps) is futile, but meaning must be enabled to be polymorphous and relevant at the site of the body. Braidotti might argue that the only way to achieve this is to seek liminal affinity, community and inter-community. However her notion, after Deleuze, of rhizomic proliferation, whilst eminently preferable to the dominance of the phallus, needs gentle encompassings to avoid the horror and loneliness of post-modern fragmentation and individualism. This sense of gentle encompassing can perhaps be seen in Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, the unique space/time of the carnivalesque novel. Haraway figures the cyborg as ideal political figure of identity, and as a blank self that feminists must code (Haraway, 1991, 163). Can the cyborg work as a container for rhizomic identities; or does it just represent a further assimilated dichotomy of man and machine with an oppressor and oppressed; or is it merely a simulacrum, a copy without original (Haraway, 1991, 165) on which we can project our identities? Or is the cyborg an metaphor that makes of identity a furthering of Plato's shadows on the cave wall (1997), an illusion of inclusion and equality, just another product of a phallogocentric desire to subsume and assimilate difference by using an androgynous, featureless body within which to splice human and machine.

It is as if Haraway, whilst on the one hand critical of the relentless capitalist drive of technology, has surrendered the identity "woman" to be consumed and regurgitated as cyborg, woman at one with machine, docile and controllable, primed for (re)production. Having absolved themselves of the sin of visceral, bodily reproduction and giving up that right finally to man who can now create machine in his own image thereby stealing reproductive power, long envied, from woman, and, ultimately, creation from God. Humans are left at risk of the science fictional future imagining of the triumph of machine over humanity (not literally, but on the level of analogy where technology and the beast of production march relentlessly over bodily reality). Haraway calls for a 'networked ideological image, suggesting a profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and the body politic' (Haraway, 1991, 170). This is akin to a rhizomic figuring of identity. She feels there is as yet 'no 'place' for women in these networks, only geometries of difference and contradiction crucial to women's cyborg identities' (Haraway, 1991, 170).

The conversation between these feminist thinkers has revealed that there is more to be done, that the female project is, as yet, still to play for. It is hard to stay outside of binary identities or create new ones in constructing gender and perhaps this is why when improvising, what is revealed are the mainstream, clichéd tropes of gender relations and identity and rarely do

improvised scenes imagine another figuration of gender identity. Writing as a mother (of three boys!), I can be certain that moving my identity beyond biological destiny is a virtual impossibility within my lived experience and these preoccupations of identity tend to emerge in my invented, in the moment activity onstage either through revelation or inversion. Any ambiguity seems virtually unavailable in the space/time of impro. I have, however, seen more experienced improvisers achieve an ambiguity of gender identity.

Here I have invoked the 'I' – my own personal experience – in order to theorise. Next I will look at Spivak who does a similar thing, invoking specific lived experience as a way of moving beyond binary oppositions by also, conversely, appropriating the essentialising category of 'woman' to avoid a fragmentation into incoherent individualism. This is a strategy that goes beyond theory to become an experiential tool.

3.5 Further Constructions of the Female Subject

Gayatri Spivak is a post-colonialist literary theorist and deconstructionist. She looks at language, particularly when it is used creatively in literature and unpicks it to search for meanings that are inherent and brought to bear by culture and context. 'Post-colonialist' refers to the fact that she comes from a position of looking at culture through the eyes of the 'other', not just a female 'other' which would make her a feminist, but the eyes of a female 'other' who has not come from a western imperial culture (i.e. she is from the Indian sub-continent). Post-colonialism is an extension of the feminist project that further takes into account difference and subjectivity.

Spivak's interest in Derrida and Deconstruction is extant in her lengthy preface to *Of Grammatology* (1993). Through a conjunction of deconstruction and post-colonial theory Spivak is resisting the essentialist positioning of subaltern subjects (Lane, 2006, 246-251). Spivak always articulates her own perspective from which she is examining the subjects she is writing about. She is articulating the "I" in the critique, or examination of the 'other' in an attempt to close the space. Spivak writes:

> However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?
>
> (Spivak, 1998, 150)

This has echoes of Bakhtin's 'I-for-another' and 'another-for-me'. Asha Varadharajan describes Spivak's strategy of stating her own (the theorist's) position as having a de-centering purpose, giving the theorist an ability to shuttle between the centre and the margin. She states, 'By implicating herself in the center, Spivak accuses it of marginality while allowing herself the

freedom and flexibility to act as a shuttle between margin and center' (Varadharajan, 1995, 85), there is no desire, however, to replace the centre with the margin and this accords with Ettinger's construction of the matrixial as not in opposition to the phallocentric.

One of Spivak's key concepts is the idea of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1998, 281). Essentialism refers to the idea that you can reduce something to an essential or original meaning, i.e. that all women have a womanliness that is definable and finite and all men have a man-ness and that these meanings are fixed and rigid. Equally one can be essentialist about national identities for example one might think that all French people are obsessed with sex or women enjoy being mistresses or a combination of the two; French women are all happy to be mistresses. These fixed and essential ways of producing and deciphering meanings take no account for differences. But arguing that no meanings can or should be fixed or essential means that we lose the ability to make affinities based on similarities and these affinities can be politically advantageous. If women cannot find any commonalities then it would be impossible to make any necessary changes to unfavorable situations. This has much in common with Foucault's strategies of resistance and perhaps subjugated knowledges can become dominant or at least heard loudly when disparate identities band together under an essentialising category as a strategic tool (see page 11).

Strategic essentialism is the strategy of exploiting these similarities that can produce essentials for political or social progress, or to make artistic statements. An example would be the appropriation of the insult "queer" by the gay pride movement to create a unifying political identity 'we're queer, we're here'. Lane summarises this concept as a necessary 'interpretive violence […] that can lead to a strategic methodology even if all the critic produces are necessary fictions' (Lane, 2006, 248). This strategy helps Spivak to conceive of 'the way in which a universal definition of the female subject is constructed via a western Orientalist vision of the Other' (Lane, 2006, 248). Deploying this strategy of essentialism can remind us that non-western subjectivities can be radically different, i.e. not all women want what western women want. Equally not all western women want what western feminists have told them they want. Spivak's study of the subaltern 'other' and deployment of strategic essentialism can remind us how women essentialise themselves as western women and more importantly that feminist theories cannot speak for all women. As Varadharajan states, citing Spivak, 'even as feminists "discover the troping error of the masculist [sic] truth-claim" they "perform the lie of constituting a truth of global sisterhood"' (Varadharajan, 1995, 77).

Spivak argues that this use of essentialist categories of human identity should not go uncriticised, and should be scrupulously visible. She refers to the '"blindness of truth

telling" [i.e. that] truths can only hold water through "strategic exclusions"' (cited in Varadharajan, 1995, 77). Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism, where an oppressed group appropriates the very signs that essentialise them, temporarily, for political ends, because these signs also cohere them, is a very interesting notion to explore in the making and reading of performance texts in relation to gender. For, at the heart of performance are bodies that ultimately cannot transcend a gendered reading and, therefore, must in some way engage with the problems of essential gender whilst at the same time undermining the fictions of truth. Onstage, in impro I cannot escape my biological definition crudely, due to boobs and bum. Despite Spivak's subsequent uneasiness with the use to which the term she herself coined has been put, I think that in the area of performance the strategy can and has been put to good use. And certainly in relation to Laura Mulvey's critical analysis of the position of women in film the idea that a subject has the ability to take the essentials of gender and knowingly put them to strategic use, Spivak's notion has the ability to move us past Mulvey's fixed binary logic. Spivak cautions that 'If one is considering a strategy, one has to look at where the group – the person, the persons, or the movement – is situated when one makes claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory' (Spivak, 1993, iv) and she proposes the 'strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak, 1998, 281). And she cautions that there is every possibility of an ossification of the requisitioned essential that could backfire on those that appropriate it and perpetuate their subordinate position (Morton, 2007, 127).

In *Exotic Parodies*, Varadharajan asks a vital question of the theorists I have engaged with up to this point:

> If the discourses of postmodernism and poststructuralism have been responsible for decentering the patriarchal and imperialist subject by demonstrating that the unity and self-sufficiency of this subject is possible only at the expense of the racial, ethnic, and feminine object, why has this perception not produced the emancipation and self-acceptance of the object? The object, in other words, continues to function as a dark continent of sorts, a species of otherness whose point of reference remains the Eurocentric and masculine self. The relationship between self and other, therefore, needs re-thinking to articulate the resistance of the object, not as the elided difference within the imperialist self, but as the defaced inhabitant of cultures, histories, and materialities, subject to and other than this self.
>
> (Varadharajan, 1995, xi)

The question of why the deconstruction of the monolithic phallus has not necessarily changed the relationship between the 'other' as object and the patriarchal and imperialist subject is evident in the warnings of Derrida that any deconstructive process which seeks to unpick established structures runs the risk of simply reinforcing those structures. If there is nothing outside of language then there is no position outside of it with which to critique it without

using it. As Audre Lorde puts it, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 1984, 223). Carlson states, 'when the very structure of the performative situation is recognised as already involved in the operations of the dominant social systems, directly oppositional performance becomes highly suspect, since there is no "outside" from which to operate' (Carlson, 1996, 172). The solution then is, perhaps, although it is a risky tactic, to appropriate the very signs of oppression as material for performance and explode them in ways that critique the problem from within, perhaps impro does this inherently as its form dismantles the norms of performance, even as its content displays the norms of gender. Carlson states that 'ironically, the more aware theorists have become of the centrality of performance in the construction and maintenance of social relationships in general and gender roles in particular, the more difficult it has become to develop a theory and practice of performance that could question or challenge these constructions' (Carlson, 1996, 172). Perhaps the female performer needs to be situated as 'double agent, recognising that in the postmodern world complicity and subversion are inextricably intertwined' (Carlson, 1996, 173). Here, the improvising female is in an ideal position to be just such a double agent.

3.6 The Historical Origins of the Female Performer

Here I trace the origins of the unruly female performer in relation to legitimate and illegitimate theatre and her connection to 'making things up as they go along' in order to establish a lineage for the female performers interviewed for the case studies. I am using a Foucauldian frame to see where power is has been located historically in relation to performance, and how the female on stage has always already embodied subjugated knowledges.

The historical narrative of theatre and performance is largely androcentric and the female presence in the record of history is hidden from view (Cockin, 1998, 19). This is merely an 'impression of women's absence' (Cockin, 1998, 19) as in fact there is a long history of female performance 'in theatres of low status and informal organisation and as travelling players performing often without script on makeshift stages in the open street' (Cockin, 1998, 19). The absence of women from the legitimate theatrical cannon and their presence in the 'folk', street and low theatres has enabled their apparent 'invisibility' in the history of theatre (Cockin, 1998, 19) and so their illegitimacy converges with the illegitimacy of the people, the masses, the lower orders whose history is also occluded through omission from the hetero-patriarchal history of wealth, power and status. This invisibility immediately politicises the historical performing female body and its subjugated knowledge and has implications for the contemporary performing female body especially one that uses a practice of performance improvisation:

> The history of the female performer looks very different when the emphasis on script-based performances and permanent theatre buildings is removed, since women appear to have flourished in what has become known as the 'illegitimate' theatre, in unregulated performances.
>
> (Cockin, 1998, 21)

The professionalisation of performance and the legitimization of theatre as a dominant cultural trope is also problematic for women as access is traditionally policed by male gatekeepers (directors, playwrights, producers, theatre-owners, patrons) and the agency with which women can perform within these legitimate theatre structures is limited by spectra of power and dominance, witness the dearth of variety in roles for female actors within legitimate theatre today and the narrowness of 'types' desirous of casting directors[11]. The non-legitimate or marginal theatres have traditionally given women the opportunity to have more agency and control over their contributions to the stage; 'women were also involved in devising performances for travelling players performing in public spaces without scripts. This is the context in which it was possible for female performer Isabella Andreini to become both famous and wealthy [in the sixteenth century]' (Cockin, 1998, 22). Now, even these public spaces have closed availability due to licensing laws on public/street performances and the gatekeepers to this practice are part of the dominant paradigm[12], but it is possible that improvised performance is still at the margins of legitimacy due to the absence of a fixed script and the immediate nature of the material devised during the performance, creating a 'poor cousin' to legitimate theatre. Historically, and now, however:

> Within a male-dominated theatrical institution and prevailing notions of gender and other identities, the presentation of female transgression may be limited. Nevertheless, the acting out of transgression constitutes an 'erotics of performance', fulfilling a fantasy of transgression which is fundamentally liberating.
>
> (Cockin, 1998, 23)

The presence of women onstage in transgressive contexts is complicated and perhaps constitutes a doubling of both concretising and transgressing the position of woman in society at the same time (Carlson's "double agent"). Therefore, the image of woman in performance slips in and out of focus. It may be this slippage that make the female body onstage as spectacle inherently ambiguous and subversive. Pamela Robertson identifies this notion of

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[11] One of the groups of interviewees spoke of finding a home in improvised theatre free from the regulations of the female actor ideals of 'fat' character actress or 'beautiful' leading lady that agents are looking for. From show to show these performers spoke of being able to make their own choices of characterisation contingent with the narrative and not dependant on appearance.

[12] Charlie Veitch's practice of 'Satirical Sarcastic Irony' (personal communication, 2009) is a form of street protest that makes visible the limitations of what is allowed in public by drawing out the gatekeepers (police and community support officers) in response to their 'performance' and entering into dialogue about the nature of the violation. See http://www.youtube.com/user/cveitch

female masquerade as a camp strategy (Robertson, 1996, 78). In troubling a reading of the Busby Berkeley film *Goldiggers of 1933* (1933) as simply misogynistic, she states that the film 'deepens and confirms the psychoanalytic view that genuine womanliness and the masquerade are "the same thing", points on a continuum' (Robertson, 1996, 78).

In terms of historical scholarship, women's performing history could have been occluded by the emphasis on textual theatre as canonical and the lowering of the status of other theatre contexts within which women may have been more visible (Aston, 1998, 39-40), such as folk theatre and extemporisation. According to Elaine Aston:

> One female performative tradition which has been recovered as a result of the unfixing of cultural status [...] is the stage history of women cross-dressing: a history of female performers whose text is the alienation of the 'body-as-text'.
> (Aston, 1998, 39-40)

One of these histories of female cross-dressers comes in the form of Lydia Thompson's British Blondes, an all female entertainment troupe that performed in America in 1860s and 70s (see page 126). This troupe performed a 'chaotic and nebulous combination of dancing, singing, minstrelsy, witty repartee, political commentary, parodies of plays and scant clothing - described as the 'leg business" (Willson, 2008, 18). The troupe, being all female, also engaged in cross dressing in order to portray male characters, whilst at the same time making little attempt to hide their unruly excessive and voluptuous femininity, they also kept the structure of their shows loose enough to improvise, ad-lib or quickly rework sections in order to respond to the political and social concerns of the moment. The combination of ambiguous gender, physical display and parodic and insightful commentary in the bodies of performing women caused huge scandal and even a riot (Allen, *Horrible Prettiness,* 1991). Willson says:

> Burlesque's anarchic and nonsensical concoction of forms and its figurehead sexualised, witty female performer had clear political intent. It fulfilled a necessary transgressive function, which was to undermine hierarchy in terms of authority, gender, form, skill, theatrical distance, social decorum and class.
> (Willson, 2008, 18)

In terms of contemporary impro all of the women interviewed for this research have identified the problem of attempting cross-gender improvisations; a female improviser will come onstage and define herself as a male character, very clearly, so that the audience know she has endowed herself as male. A male improviser will enter the scene and deny the gender swap by referring to the character as 'she' or 'her' even though she was clearly playing a male character. Tom Salinsky, one of the founding teachers at The Spontaneity Shop (see page 110) states:

> Because the gendered body reads so clearly onstage as male or female it is hard to play across gender. But what I have noticed is that it works in all-female improvisation groups, in mixed groups it does not seem to work. In all male groups, if I endow myself as a woman my colleagues will invariably read that as effeminate camp maleness rather than me as a woman. But in all-female groups everyone, including the audience, is really happy to suspend disbelief and read the players as other genders if they characterise themselves as such.
>
> (in conversation, 2010)

This is echoed by the interviewees and leads me into the possibility of developing an all female improvisation troupe. My journalling has revealed a frustration recently in improvising with men – even those I enjoy playing with and trust. For example, at a recent show of *Interrobang!? Tales of the Undirected*[13] at The Hen and Chickens Theatre Bar (03.03.2010) a dinner party scene with unspoken tensions between the characters was called for. I took the stage with another female improviser and two male improvisers all of whom are very experienced. The clear initial offer came from the other female improviser, which I 'yes-anded' (i.e. accepted her idea and built upon it), which was that she would take offence at everything said. The two male improvisers either missed this offer or played "not good enough" because they began another offer that not only ignored the first offer, but by its nature excluded the female improvisers to the extent we actually exited the scene, feeling we were superfluous to requirements. This incident, combined with many similar frustrations that seem to have their roots in gender relations, illustrate the curious position of the female improviser within mixed groups. The following statement is a possible starting point for disrupting this position, either through forming an all-female group or through making enormous conscious efforts in workshops and performances to be unruly and disruptive:

> 'Woman', especially, because she is the unknowable Other of patriarchy, can make her marginal position a source of disruptive power: though politically powerless, she can refuse to obey the rules of appropriate gender behaviour, flaunting her sexual mystery as if to point out that the patriarchy cannot do without her
>
> (Gay, 1998, 42)

Is it possible that impro functions in a similar way in relation to theatre and, therefore, hetero-patriarchy? Impro, especially, because it is the unknowable 'other' of theatre, can make its marginal position a source of disruptive power: though culturally powerless, it can refuse to obey the rules of appropriate theatrical behaviour, flaunting its textual mystery as if to point out that the theatre cannot do without it.

When discussing the 'erotics of performance' Penny Gay points out that:

[13] The Spontaneity Shop Level Three impro class performance group (see page 110)

> We are invited to contemplate a changing image of 'woman', for whom a refusal of the codes of femininity offers exciting possibilities for the liberation of physical, psychic and erotic energy. But whether the heroine's transvestism or other disguise (nun's habit, shrew's habits) is protective, evasive, empowering or simply a game depends on the perceived relation between women and the patriarchy at the moment of the play's embodiment.
>
> (Gay, 1998, 45)

Davis discusses the notion that the acting profession was historically populated by women of ill-repute and also its gradual gentrification:

> As long as the drama was devoid of literary merit or social relevance, and as long as performers were of lower class of itinerant theatrical backgrounds, the public readily believed in actresses' immorality and worthlessness. Under such conditions, acting was indeed a vocation to be dreaded by every middle-class woman - and her parents. With a different type of play and a different audience, however, the theatre became an attractive career for middle-class women.
>
> (Davis, 1998, 77)

The gentrification of performance allowed entry for women of a different class – an apparent emancipation. Subsequently performance art has challenged the position of women in legitimate theatre as colonised. Can impro place the productive power of theatre (back) into the hands of women, and the moment of creation? The rest of this research seeks to address this question through an exploration of the neologism "liminal ludic communitas" or "playing together on the threshold" and an analysis of female improvisers' lived experience of impro.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter, after establishing what is meant by performance I have moved through various theories around gender and the figuration of women, beginning with Mulvey's notion of women as object of the male gaze. I have used the female dancing body to epitomise this 'problem', this essential subjection of women, and then tried to imagine through putting Butler, Braidotti, Haraway and Ettinger into conversation, a different way of figuring gender and femininity as unformed and nebulous without merely creating a new binary substitution. Spivak's strategy moves us away from theory into a practical application that uses difference, individuality and cohesion and communal groups to create the possibility of lived identity that resists the dominant order, akin to Foucault's resistance theories. I finished by returning to the idea of performance and the performing female to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate theatres where I found that historically, women have allied with extemporisation but not without challenges. The historical figures of Isabella Andreini and Lydia Thompson epitomise the unruly, improvising female in *Commedia* and Burlesque respectively, both creating a stir. The question remains; in the liminal, ludic, communal space/time of impro how

do my female case studies fare? The next chapter articulates the research methodology used to find out.

Chapter Four – Methodology

4.1 Introduction – Framing a Methodology Within a Field of Ethnography

The rationale for focussing on the female experience of the practice of comedy improvisation is that, in testing out a thesis of the marginal and radical status of a particular practice, it is useful to examine the experience of those marginalised within that practice. It is hoped that this will enable me to draw out and examine notions of the liminal and transformative within the practice of impro. Women could perhaps be characterised as the original subjugated 'other' (Levinas, 1999) and their experiences can still have the potential to help us understand more of the nature of the dominant order. The feminist literature and theory articulated in the previous chapter can help to understand the experiences of female improvisers who practise comedy improvisation. But in order to fully understand the lived experience of female improvisers and draw out the themes that concern them it is necessary to collect and analyse data alongside the literature that has been reviewed.

In 4.7 I take a detailed look at grounded theory. I have utilised grounded theory as it allows the research to move away from a priori assumptions. It has allowed this research project to evolve in the way that it has from a starting point of female comedy to an exploration of the female experience of impro. The paradox is that in the attempt to move away from an objective *a priori* discourse it has become necessary to select other discourses to frame the grounded theory research. This is especially evident in the feminist discourse of the previous chapter. However, in an attempt to mitigate the totalising gestures of discourse I have put the feminist theories explored into dialogue with each other to examine their affinities and points of difference. This is also the method utilised in the chapter of liminal ludic communitas (Chapter Two). Turner, alone, covers the notion of liminal ludic communitas in his writings on theatre and anthropology. However, to rely solely on Turner to support my claims for impro would create an *a priori* discourse that opposes the grounded theory methodology. To this end, Turner, too, has been put into dialogue with Bakhtin, Broadhurst, Schechner, Ravieri, Wills and Zemon-Davis. As the warps and wefts of the thesis have been woven together, so this dialoguing continues.

In this chapter I will examine and critique a variety of methods of Qualitative Research in order to choose the most appropriate methods for this research. The methods derive from social science and practice research in performing arts models and have been selected for their potential to enable research into the 'self' and 'other' in order to look at the similarities and differences in the experience of the practice and performance of comedy improvisation for a selection of London-based female practitioners. The approach is necessarily interdisciplinary as 'methodology is influenced by the purpose and goals of a particular project' (Thompson Klein, 2007, 42). The aim is not to ignore differences by way of creating a meta-narrative of female

improvisation through similarities of experience, but to examine difference and similarity in dialogue. Interdisciplinary methodologies:

> Stimulate productive propagation and prompt a new articulation with an emphasis on and an ordering of phenomena within the cultural field that does not impose transdisciplinary universalism. The basis of interdisciplinary work [...] is selecting one path while bracketing others.
>
> (Thompson Klein, 2007, 43)

The paths of methodological disciplines that are available to this research are; for the 'self', action research, self-ethnography and phenomenology through praxis and journal making; and for the 'other', narrative inquiry and discourse analysis through recorded conversation (interview). Participant observation can also be used as a strategy regarding both 'self' and 'other'. In the first draft of this chapter I attempted to use the impersonal term 'the researcher' to refer to my plans and actions for the methodology. This came out of a reading of the social science methodologies for collecting data from people and the masculinist desire for objectivity where the interviewer is seen as an 'instrument of data collection' (Oakley, 1981, 32) and is required to mask their own subjectivity through impersonality. Anne Oakley's argument is that, as a feminist interviewing women, the interaction, relationship and subjectivity of the researcher with her informants is part of a non-masculinist, non-hierarchical data collection paradigm (Oakley, 1981, 38), therefore, I have chosen to use the first person singular both within this methodological chapter and within the thesis as a whole.

In the AHRC[14] research definition, a series of questions or problems must be defined, objectives set that can help to answer these questions or problems, a research context defined (why these questions, what is the existing knowledge in the area and how will this research contribute to knowledge), a specification of research methods (how will the questions be answered), and a rationale for the chosen methodology (why will this answer the questions) – in other words, as Michael Biggs paraphrases, "questions and answers", "context" and "methods" (Biggs, 2003, 3).

Paul Clarke argues that theory can be approached from within practice and quotes Susan Melrose as suggesting that 'the practitioner may have "an experiential approach to theory from within practice, rather than a discursive approach outside of practice"' (Clarke, 2004, 1). He states:

> As a theorist in practice, one carries an internalised Panopticon (Foucault 1977:200), as both object of information and subject in communication. As a practitioner in the work, reflecting theoretically upon my own practice, I moved between subject and object positions. Subjecting my own practices to what

[14] Arts and Humanities Research Council

> Foucault calls "a field of visibility" (Foucault 1977:202), I became the principle of my "own subjection" (202). In writing theoretically, as a practitioner, I took up a speculative view-point that had the potential to overpower my own practices.
> (Clarke, 2004, 3)

Care must be taken, when researching one's own practice, not to collapse the gap between research and practice because, while practice can be research, it would be too tempting to lose myself within practice and forget the questions that I am asking of that practice and, therefore, miss important moments that could help to answer the original questions. Maintaining a strong theoretical frame is necessary to avoid this occurrence. In the case of the research this is a framework of the 'other' set against the dominant order, and in particular, defining the experiences of women performing and practising impro framed as subjugated knowledges.

Baz Kershaw further problematises practice research in the performing arts as two-stranded, practice-based research and practice-as-research, and he argues that research projects that set out to 'have a permeable boundary between these two approaches have the best chance of creating significant search results' (Kershaw, 2002, 133):

> I take practice-based research to refer to research through live performance practice, to determine how and what it may be contributing in the way of new knowledge or insights in fields other than performance. Hence, practice-based research may be pursued for many purposes – historical, political, aesthetic, etc. – and so researchers may not need to be theatre scholars to pursue it. By practice-as-research I refer to research into performance practice, to determine how that practice may be developing new insights into or knowledge about the forms, genres, uses, etc., of performance itself, for example with regard to their broader social and/or cultural processes.
> (Kershaw, 2002, 138)

The distinction between 'research through' and 'research into' that Kershaw notes highlights their interdependence which is 'of singular research value, because the ephemerality of performance introduces into any research aiming to deal with it an experiential component in which the subjective-objective/participant-observer dyads implied by 'through' and 'into' are deeply problematised' (Kershaw, 2002, 139). Kershaw suggests that performance practice research that draws on analytical frameworks that are at the boundaries of 'research through' and 'research into' are likely to have more significant results than discrete frameworks that belong to one or the other methodologies (Kershaw, 2002, 139) – hence the necessary interdisciplinarity of the research methodologies considered and eventually employed here. Kershaw calls for a reflexive research design (Kershaw, 2002, 139). The design of this research project is using narratives of the female experience of impro to reflect upon impro's position within the western theatrical tradition. However, the research is also reflexive. Paul Rae, querying the limitations of reflexive research design opts (for the purposes of PhD) not to have

the performance work examined and initiates a two-fold investigation: into the making of "the show" as a director, and the making of the making of "the show" as a researcher and found this to be unproblematic as long as he remained 'alive to the contingent and contentious nature of one's position' (Rae, 2003, 1). In a similar way, this "doubling" is occurring in this research. I am initiating a two-fold investigation; the making of the practice and the performance of impro as a female improviser and the making of the making of the practice and the performance of impro of the female improviser (with reference to the experience of a selection of other female improvisers) as a researcher. I, as the practising researcher, am not only doing the practice, but also making paradigms of experience through which to examine certain theoretical assumptions.

In this position of practising researcher, Rae encountered some interesting effects; 'there I am, in the auditorium, watching a run, taking notes, I'm watching, I'm writing, I'm watching, I'm writing, and then I'm doing neither because there is no distinction between them' (Rae, 2003, 2). He consequently concludes that 'somewhere between the orderly, self-conscious instructions and annotations that open the diary and make it so conducive to critical reflection, and the later breakdown of any such aspiration, reflexive research becomes untenable' (Rae, 2003, 2). For him, the simple fact of the matter was that the title of the show came first and the practice process has been one of discovering what was meant by it (Rae, 2003, 5). In a similar way, in improvised performance the content of the performance comes first and the reflection comes after and cannot reflexively inform what has already been done. On a subsequent occasion of practice the content may throw up entirely different issues, questions and insights. He states, in defence of this; 'there was never any critical reflexivity separate from the artistic process – nothing that exceeded the necessary procedures of theatre directing. Indeed, reflexive practice in the arts is a red herring, not because it doesn't exist, but because all practice is inherently reflexive' (Rae, 2003, 5). This is almost an argument against formalising the reflexive spiral, as it is an integral, instinctive practice for the creative mind anyway. However, if formalising the methodology is a necessary step in the current ontological process of research, Rae proposes 'a way of accounting for a paradoxically flexible – or variable – reflexivity, which at points may be entirely subsumed within an unreflexive process, but will always re-emerge; a reflexivity that makes good both definitions of the term: as taking account of itself, and as happens without conscious thought' (Rae, 2003, 6). In the case of this research there is the added dimension of reflecting on (i.e. consciously thinking about) the experience of female improvisers in relation to the position of impro within the theatre canon. The term Rae adopts is "invention" as he determines that this covers both research and practice; 'by understanding artistic and research practices as mutually implicated in a process of invention, one can be simultaneously invested in and led by the work as it unfolds, without ever fully

relinquishing conceptual engagement (what the researcher fears) or artistically determined priorities (what the practitioner fears)' (Rae, 2003, 7).

Alexandra Carter differentiates between 'methods'; tools and techniques of data gathering such as interviews, and 'methodology'; the theories which inform which methods to use and how to analyse the resultant data. She states; 'methodology is the conscious, articulated approach to research which helps form questions, guides the selection and interrogation of source material and has the potential to result in a new epistemological framework' (Carter, 1996, 21). Carter examines the research methodologies she engaged in a particular piece of research that, similarly to this research, used particular theories that allowed the researcher to 'identify performance as a contributor to the social construction and regulation of gender and to claim the experiences of women in performance as constituting significant knowledge of the world' (Carter, 1996, 22). This epistemological stance endorses 'the argument that the performing arts are not just artistic products but are significant cultural events which contribute to the belief and value systems of a society' (Carter, 1996, 23). Carter's assertion is that performance is both produced by and produces culture, i.e. that '"text" and "context" are contingent' (Carter, 1996, 23). It is necessary in this research to contextualise the historical and contemporary practice of impro and this exploration is located in Chapter Five. It is also necessary, as far the ethical design and the case studies themselves will allow, to contextualise the participants of the study and this contextualisation is also located in Chapter Five. Carter characterises all research as subject to the bias of the researcher and that the researcher's own context should be declared – the "I" in the research (Carter, 1996, 24-5). The research that she is specifically referring to in her paper is on the ballets of the music hall era and their female performers. Of her chosen theoretical stance she writes 'the approach which allowed for such a declaration of bias as a strength, which owes its allegiance to no single disciplinary stance and, therefore, is able to accommodate the complexity of such a concept as the gendered image, is that of feminism' (Carter, 1996, 25-6). In the same way as Carter's research, the research I am engaged with is 'an examination by a woman, of an activity undertaken by women, in order to understand how perception of that activity has been influenced by patriarchal ideologies' (Carter, 1996, 26). Feminism has allowed female subjugated knowledge to become a significant discourse. Carter goes on to say:

> A distinctive feature of a feminist approach is that it embraces methodology as well as subject matter. It not only acknowledges women as equally valid subjects for study but raises fundamental questions as to how such study can be approached. However, no one single theoretical paradigm for the study of women in history is offered [...] As there is no one feminism, there is no single emanating theory. However, theory can be characterised, if not defined [..] An outline of [the] significant characteristics [of a feminist theoretical stance is] (a) a recognition of the patriarchal values which dominate both traditional discourse and its

> application; (b) a recognition of the gaps and silences in discourse; (c) an examination of the reasons for those gaps and silences and; (d) the development of other modes of research even if it means using patriarchal texts as a starting point'
>
> (Carter, 1996, 26)

These characteristics as defined by Carter are highly relevant to the research being conducted here, especially because much of the discourse around power and liminal ludic communitas, as well as the practice of impro itself derives from male figures and so are arguably patriarchal texts. However, as the ontology and epistemology of feminist discourse are not solely the realm of biologically female gendered persons, it could be argued that many of these male authors/practitioners stand outside of a patriarchal domain themselves. The data collected during the course of this research will be subjected to study from a feminist theoretical stance and the specific feminisms (Chapter Three) will be engaged with and articulated in Chapter Six where the collected data and literature is analysed. With the embodied female experience at the heart of this investigation it is important to note that a feminist theoretical stance 'has the potential to offer a radical subversion of traditional readings of the arts' (Carter, 1996, 28). As Carter states:

> A feminist researcher is one who seeks to validate the experiences of women from their own perspective as constituting significant knowledge about the world, and exposes her own motivation for doing so. The intervention of the 'I', in an interdisciplinary approach to research, reveals the ideological constructs of femininity which are embodied in the performing arts not as predestined, inevitable or immutable, but as hegemonic systems of power and control.
>
> (Carter, 1996, 28)

Data is generated through making observations, both participant and non-participant of the practice and position of women within the group of improvisers that I belong to. I am also asking these women who regularly work together to disclose narratives of their experiences of improvising through unstructured interviews. The aim of this data collection for my research will be to look at the female experience of impro in detail. Interpretation of this data will accord with Clifford Geertz's notion of culture not as materialist 'stuff', but as 'stuff' that creates emergent meanings that govern behaviour (Mitchell, 2007, 60). 'If culture is a system of meanings, and ethnography is writing culture, then ethnography consists of finding out what the system of meanings is and then writing it down' (Mitchell, 2007, 61). Geertz called this 'thick description' which is defined as 'description-plus-interpretation' (Mitchell, 2007, 61). So that the outcomes of research will always be a process of interpretation that itself produces layers of meaning, an inscribing of culture (Mitchell, 2007, 61). The very process of journalling and collecting interview conversations are not 'pure' data, but already have a layer of interpretation applied to the cultural 'events', therefore, as the researcher, I must guard against making empirical claims for the final (temporarily suspended) interpretation, but

must understand that what is being inscribed are layer upon layer of narratives that produce meaning and from which further narratives can be drawn. Through this process it needs to be understood that I am in danger of inadvertently inventing a 'culture' of female impro by conducting this research and interpretation. It is necessary to guard against the researcher producing a fiction and, therefore, holding power in an unequal relationship with those described (Mitchell, 2007, 62). Placing my 'self' in the position of object of research as well may mediate this somewhat, but it is important to understand the nature of the production of knowledge and 'new' contribution to knowledge that this project is attempting in relation to notions of power. 'By selecting certain observations or events to write about – either consciously or unconsciously by lapse of memory – ethnographic authors effectively become the editors of the culture or society they describe. This is considered a position of power' (Mitchell, 2007, 62). This problem of power in authorship is why reflexivity is crucial in the interpretation of data and why this research will include a self-reflexive statement as to how I became interested in the area of study and will declare some of my assumptions about outcomes and my ontological and epistemological stance (Chapter Five). 'Stance' is an unfortunate word to use in this context as it implies a fixity of position. My ontology and epistemology is fluid and responsive to new ideas, therefore I am prepared to adjust my assumptions through conducting this research. The often cited misuse of the power of ethnographic inscribing is attributed to Napoleon Chagnon, an ethnographer of the 1960s who, in a 2002 inquiry, was found to have been deliberately provoking the Amazonian tribe he was researching into warlike behaviour which he then portrays in his analysis as their 'natural' behaviour. He essentialises the tribe as violent, which then has resultant effects in how the tribe were viewed and treated politically (Mitchell, 2007, 63). In a sense, this research here has a responsibility to tread a fine line in how it frames its search for a particularly female experience of improvising. By framing the research for the participants as the 'female experience of improvising' I may incite a, potentially antagonistic, gendered response. Perhaps this result can be mediated by simply posing the theme as 'your experience of improvising' within an all female context when the femaleness of the experience is implicitly rather than explicitly 'in the frame'. Mitchell states 'essentialism of "cultures" or "societies" is not only politically problematic, it is also empirically incorrect, generating an appearance of static and homogenous units where in fact they are historically more contingent and differentiated' (Mitchell, 2007, 63). Therefore, this research must be designed to reveal the heterogeneity and commonality of the female experience of practising and performing comedy improvisation amongst a selection of London-based improvising women.

4.2 Phenomenology

One way of avoiding the tendency to universalise and homogenise the experiences of individuals is to approach the research and data phenomenologically. Edmund Husserl founded the philosophical movement, phenomenology, to legitimise the structures of subjective experience and consciousness as a mode of study (Husserl, 2010). This ontological approach foregrounds the subjective experience of the (subjugated) knower as opposed to *a priori* assumptions and objectivity of a Cartesian approach to knowledge. This philosophical perspective was appropriated to the social sciences, by Max Weber in the 1960s and is based on 'understanding human behaviours from the actor's own frame of reference' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 2) so that humans are seen as subjects full of heterogeneous meaning, not objects solely shaped by social phenomena (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 2). This theory of phenomenology was a reaction against theories of logical positivism, developed by the social scientists of the nineteenth century, especially Emile Durkheim, in which the researcher seeks out facts of or reductive causes of social phenomena with no regard for subjectivity and heterogeneity (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 2). According to Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor, the phenomenologist 'examines how the world is experienced. For him or her the important reality is what people imagine it to be' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 2) from this it is possible to extrapolate that, regardless of what the reality is (if indeed there is one reality), it is the stories that subjects relate about their experience that hold the important data for analysis. This is why the phenomenologist 'seeks understanding through such qualitative methods as participant observation, open-ended interviewing and personal documents' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 2). These are the methods that will be employed in this research. Ultimately, the phenomenologist 'views human behaviour – what people say and do – as a product of how people interpret their world' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 13). So that, what women say and do in improvisations and in interviews is a lens through which to view their individual interpretations of the world, and I can expect there to be both similarity and difference among the various subjects of examination.

4.3 Action Research and Self-Ethnography

Melissa Trimingham's 2002 article, *A Methodology for Practice as Research,* has been an indispensable tool for constructing a practice-led-research methodology in performance studies, cutting, as it does, straight through the debates surrounding the trade-off between a hermeneutic and a logical-positivist approach to research, that is, a cyclical, spiral approach to research rather than linear. This difference is more suited to the kind of qualitative research utilised here as opposed to quantitative data collection and analysis. Trimingham articulates a clear methodology, one that she has successfully used in her own research and one which seeks to broaden the types of research considered to be practice-led-research in the

performing arts beyond those conducted by practising artists (Trimingham, 2002, 54). She also calls for a clear articulation of methodology as well as a communication and dissemination of research findings in order for practice to qualify as research (Trimingham, 2002, 54). She states; 'all practice is relevant to research but does not necessarily contribute to research until it is subject to analysis and commentary, using a language that aims to be as clear and unambiguous as possible'. She also asserts that it is necessary for the research to benefit others apart from the researcher themselves, that artistic insight is not necessarily a research outcome and that artistic communication is not the same as research communication (Trimingham, 2002, 54-55). She is attempting to establish a more concrete methodology of practice-led-research in the performing arts using methods borrowed from various sources.

Practice-led-research has its roots in the action research of education and business and the hermeneutic research of anthropology that originates with Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic circle (1999). This is the idea that the experience and understanding of phenomena is subjective. Hans Gadamer (1976) developed this model into a spiral where understandings are returned to by the knower at a higher level during subjective experience of phenomena so this becomes a reflective way of knowing and learning. Trimingham argues to combine this with social science methodologies concerned with evaluating qualitative data (Trimingham, 2002, 56). Trimingham feels it is important that research findings do not remain as personal insight (whether practitioner's or audience's) through the claim that the knowledge gained is embodied and, therefore, untranslatable into words (Trimingham, 2002, 54). She goes on to define the task of the researcher as the translator of the practice experience into analytical language so that the insight and understanding that has been reached through the practice can be shared (Trimingham, 2002, 55).

Trimingham acknowledges that there is a certain desire to use practice-led-research as a way of escaping the Cartesian mode of thought (Trimingham, 2002, 55) by using methodologies that attempt to deal with the embodied nature of performance. Despite this, she cautions; 'If we want to understand and not just experience we have to think' (Trimingham, 2002, 55) and analyse. As Trimingham states; 'researching academics have specific questions to ask of the material they study, and turn to practice as the most suitable means of answering these questions' (Trimingham, 2002, 55). This research is questioning the subversive potential of the performance form of impro through my own practice, observation of the practice of the other women in my group and the stories told of practice by groups of female improvisers. In terms of the self-ethnographic aspect of this research it is useful to have the hermeneutic awareness that 'the question asked ultimately determines the answer; and it consequently allows for constant change within a specified structure of working' (Trimingham,

2002, 55). The hermeneutic interpretative spiral model allows for a progression of practice. Trimingham states, 'the built-in dynamism of the spiral is the only paradigm model that can account for such change in theory in relation to the ongoing practice, whilst also successfully defining the area of research, and preventing it spiralling out of control' (Trimingham, 2002, 56). This model also allows for the fact that the entry and exit points of the research project are arbitrary and that the exit point is temporary potentially, thereby mitigating the fixed nature of 'writing up' research. The finished thesis is only one interpretation, and revisiting, or continuing the research at a later date may result in different conclusions (Trimingham, 2002, 57). Trimingham also reminds that the knowledge that the researcher brings to the project or their own history and context will shape the answers gleaned and, therefore, it is necessary to ask as open a question as possible when embarking (Trimingham, 2002, 57). This notion of the open questions derives from the phenomenological approach to research where 'the accretions of culture, habit, prejudice and so on [...] cling to the phenomena we investigate and cloud our perceptions' (Trimingham, 2002, 57). Within this hermeneutic model of approaching research questions the 'solutions found are merely an answer, but never the answer' (Trimingham, 2002, 57)

Dance artist and academic, Jane Bacon's evaluation process is constant, after every rehearsal and performance she evaluates, reassesses and adjusts through rigorous listening, watching, comparisons to the tasks she set in advance and a subjective looking, listening and feeling. If something does not work then she will try it a different way, but she always comes back to the original set task before moving on (Bacon, 2004). This is a demonstration of the hermeneutic spiral in action, and it seems to neatly fit with the method that Trimingham outlines, one that is well served through journal keeping. Similarly Sarah Rubidge's evaluation process feeds her hermeneutic spiral, her questions for evaluation are; 'what was it we set out to do in terms of this technology? Did it work? Yes/No? Could it have worked better? Yes/No? Every time I put something up I re-work it later' (Rubidge, 2004). She uses self, and outside evaluation, and even considers anecdotal evaluation from informal settings such as the bar after a show. In a similar way, this research will explore an avenue of improvement of practice. This avenue is underpinned with the female experience of improvisation. The reflection and challenge setting for the next performance or training session will bear in mind my uniquely female experience of impro and journal/field notes will be underpinned by this focus. Similarly, informal data and evaluation (Rubidge: "in the bar") will be recorded through that same lens, with reference to the genderedness of any informal evaluations.

When questioned about how her work ties to a variety of epistemologies Bacon problematizes the term as too abstract for her, she is more interested in the methodology (or

the practice itself) and any connections to broader knowledges are purely intuitive. It is a devising process for her; 'I come in with these ideas and we try them out' (Bacon, 2004). This would be too ambiguous an approach for this research project. It is a possibility that themes of gender and identity are extant in the practice of impro because the performance emerges directly as a result of the spontaneity and interrelationships of the people practising and watching it. The 'ideas' in the work come from the 'now' of the work and so any pre-planning of themes is barely possible, therefore, to a certain extent the epistemology is the work, the work relies on the knowingness of bodies, spontaneously, in the moment of performing. Rubidge seems much more comfortable with the philosophical bedrock of her work, having combined academic and artistic work for years. She says, 'my philosophical thinking is embedded in what I do as an artist. It is not something I do outside of my artistic practice, and then do this "art" work somewhere else. Therefore, I don't have to validate my artistic work through that philosophical underpinning. Its just all part of the same practice' (Rubidge, 2004). In a similar way, it could be argued that the practice of impro is a philosophy, and it is the philosophy of impro that, in a sense, this research project is attempting to explore and tease out through an examination of the female experience of the practice.

The notion that 'the researcher is intimately involved in the research, and effects the outcomes' (Trimingham, 2002, 59) is a characteristic of the extreme hermeneutic interpretative research model; action research. This model 'also acknowledges the 'double hermeneutic' whereby the researcher's experiences effect the research and so do those of the participants' in this mode, rather than the researcher being positioned as 'expert' come to observe experience, 'the researcher became more involved with the object of research until researcher and practitioner became synonymous' (Trimingham, 2002, 59). This is clearly applicable to this research project as I am also a practitioner and researching my own practice as well as others' and within a paradigm of phenomenological research, a methodology of action research combined with a strategy participant observation can account for my level of involvement.

4.4 Participant Observation

'"Ethnography" means "writing culture" [...] the notion of description of a particular society, culture, group or social context' (Mitchell, 2007, 55). An ethnographic study describes in detail a particular event in order to derive broader inferences (Mitchell, 2007, 55) and is the study of others (Mitchell, 2007, 55-6) in the case of this research this methodology is problematised because, as discussed above, I am also a practitioner. I am studying both myself and trying to improve my practice whilst also studying others in a context in which I am an active participant, hence the use of a strategy of participant observation:

> Participant observation aims to enable researchers to view social action 'on the ground' as it unfolds in a 'normal' and 'natural' fashion. As long-term participants, rather than mere observers, their effect on a social life is minimised, and they are able to gauge the relationship between what people say about what they do and what they actually do.
>
> (Mitchell, 2007, 56)

A researcher utilising a methodology of participant observation to study selected people's experience of a particular cultural phenomenon can 'speak with them, joke with them, empathise with them, and share their concerns and experiences. Prolonged contact in the setting allows them to view the dynamics of conflict and change and thus see [the group] in process' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 5). Participant observation in its early usage was applied to research situations where there was no personal stake in the setting (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 5), but has since developed to include situations where the researcher is conducting research within his or her own social or work setting. It is in fact arguable that there are any settings in which a researcher can have no personal stake, even if there is none to begin with, the research is sure to develop one, for with qualitative research methods, the researcher is involved, there is no objectivity (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 8). In the case of this research, the participant observation method that I am conducting through journal keeping after workshops at The Spontaneity Shop is within a setting in which I have been involved since before the research methods were deployed; so it can be considered to be my own socio-cultural setting within which I am conducting research. Therefore, because I know all the actors[15] involved personally, and have varied personal relationships with them, I must; 'resist the temptation to remain comfortable or fixed in [my] own perspective. Understand others, all others, for what they are and how they see the world' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 8).

A phenomenological approach holds that 'a situation has meaning only through people's interpretations and definitions of it. Their actions in turn stem from this meaning' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 14). Thus there will be differences in interpretation between each actor because each actor brings a unique past to bear on the present that bestows a particular and subjective way of interpreting events (Bogdan and Taylor, 175, 14). However, actors in particular settings of commonality may develop shared interpretations or 'shared perspectives' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 14). An aspect of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, holds that 'while people may act within the framework of an organisation, it is the interpretation and not the organisation which determine action. Social roles, norms, values, and goals may set conditions and consequences for action, but do not determine what a person will do' (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 15). In the case of the interviewees chosen for this

[15] 'actors' in this instance and throughout the methodology chapter refers to the subjects of research rather than 'actors' in the theatrical sense, although throughout the thesis 'actors' in the theatrical sense will largely be referred to as 'improvisers' or 'players'

research (three sets of female improvisers who regularly work together with the other women within those sets) it will be important to tease out the shared perspectives that occur due to their interaction within their particular improvisation organisations, the symbolic interactions, as well as the subjective differences between them. This is the process of interaction, interrelation/similarity and difference that creates meaning and that accords with Rosi Braidotti's trivalent ontology of gender difference, that there are differences within the woman, differences between women and differences between men and women. These subjective differences and collective affinities can be best discovered through a methodology of narrative inquiry through unstructured interviewing in groups where the stories of the individual women and their collectivity can be recorded.

4.5 Narrative Inquiry

The study of narrative is the study of ways of experiencing (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 2) and has been aligned with feminist studies and orality (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 3). According to F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, 'people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 2). They term the phenomenon of narrative "story" and the method of inquiry "narrative" in this research the same distinction will be made between narratives that emerge on the improvisation stage – "story" and the method of inquiry, again, "narrative". Connelly and Clandinin warn, 'one of the most frequent criticisms of narrative [is] that narrative unduly stresses the individual over the social context' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 2) this research seeks to mitigate this to an extent by designing an unstructured interview conversation between three improvisers who know each other and work together, as well as myself. This design should, not only collect individual's stories, but also collect these stories within the social relationship context. This method should engender the sense of equality between the participants, and diminish the potentially dominant role of the researcher that Connelly and Clandinin call for (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 4). They state 'it is particularly important that all participants have a voice within the relationship' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 4), by designing a comfortable 'chat-like' social situation, I hope to take the emphasis off 'being interviewed for a purpose' and onto the gentle emergence of narratives. Connelly and Clandinin realise that a research relationship that is developed like this eliminates objectivity and creates 'connected knowing' (1990, 4) and means that the researcher's own narratives, whilst they should not be foregrounded, also come into play in the background and in a valid manner (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 4). This develops a 'mutual construction of the research relationship, a relationship in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 4). Connelly and

Clandinin understand that the narrative of lived experience is present even before and after the research lens is focussed upon it 'a person is at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling and reliving stories' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 4). In a similar way to 'thick description', discussed above, 'it is in the tellings and retellings that entanglements become acute, for it is here that temporal and social, cultural horizons are set and reset' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 4). It is anticipated that, in the retelling of the collected data within the research report (Chapter Six), it is these very entanglements that will provide the interpretative drive.

There are a variety of philosophical treatments of experience including Aristotelian dualistic metaphysics, empiricist atomistic conceptions, a Marxist view of experience distorted by ideology, behaviourist notions of stimulus and response and the postructuralist notion that discursive practice produces experience (Clandinin, 2006, 46). Connelly and Clandinin favour a Deweyan, pragmatic philosophy as the basis for understanding experience through narrative inquiry where the two criteria of experience are expressed as interaction (individuals in relation) and continuity (experiences build upon each other) (Clandinin, 2006, 46). Clandinin defines narrative inquiry as; 'a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series or places, and in social interaction with milieus' (Clandinin, 2006, 46). The entry and exit points of the inquirer do not equate to the beginning and end of the stories told, they continue and can be affected by the inquiry (Clandinin, 2006, 46). The starting point for narrative inquiry is embodied, lived experience (usually that of the researcher as that is where the initial question or topic of inquiry emerges from) and it is also 'an exploration of the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, experienced and enacted' (Clandinin, 2006, 46). This theoretical framework of pragmatic ontology enables narrative inquirers to legitimately study individual experiences in the world and through this study enrich and transform the embodied experience for themselves and others (Clandinin, 2006, 46).

Narrative Inquiry data can be collected in a variety of ways; 'field notes of shared experience, journal records, interview transcripts, other's observations, story telling, letter writing, autobiographical writing' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 5). Field notes are characterised by Connelly and Clandinin as "active recording" because the researcher is 'expressing her personal practical knowing in her work' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 5) in the case of this research the notion of field notes overlaps with my journal of my own practice of impro, so much so that they are one and the same document and so are inextricably bound up as a thick description of "active recording", "action research" (above), "participant observation" (above), and "self-ethnography" (also above), thus constituting a document of "thick description". Connelly and Clandinin define the unstructured interview as an important

data collection tool within the methodology of narrative inquiry; 'interviews are conducted between researcher and participant, transcripts are made, the meetings are made available for further discussion, and they become part of the ongoing narrative record' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 5). In the case of this research, while it is inadvisable to rule out further interviews with the participants, I have to be aware of the time constraints of these busy people and, with ethics in mind, refrain from pressurising for further meetings. In the eventuality of further contact, email exchanges would be a useful tool for 'storying and restorying' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 6) and would come under the method of letter writing to collect data. Other sources of data are not ruled out in this paradigm and consequently Patti Stiles' (an internationally experienced improviser and close colleague of Keith Johnstone) online blog will be entered into the data set, as will a chapter linked to impro and gender difference from *Something Like Drug; An Unauthorised Oral History or Theatresports* (1995). These are additions to the data set that the method of Grounded Theory allows for, a developing set of data that is not a priori fixed, but evolves along with the research.

After data collection and transcription and collating of data sources, comes that task of 'writing the narrative' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 7-10). Connelly and Clandinin caution against producing a narrative with the illusion of linear causality and instead suggest that the narrative researcher's report always has a sense of the whole even when writing the detail (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 7). Using a particular lens through which to view the data is useful way to achieve this and in the case of the current study, as discussed above, feminism and feminist performance studies and dominant and subjugated knowledges are be highly suitable lenses through which to view the collected data. Connelly and Clandinin identify three writing criteria; economy, selectivity and familiarity (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 8). They state:

> With these criteria [...] the stories stand between the general and the particular, mediating the generic demands of science with the personal, practical, concrete demands of living. Stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived. The narrative inquirer undertakes this mediation from beginning to end and embodies these dimensions as best as he or she can in the written narrative.
>
> (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 8)

So it is to be understood that this type of inquiry oscillates between the general and the specific but that great care must be taken not to make claims for the lived experience of the improvising female. Connelly and Clandinin go on to say 'life, like the narrative writer's task, is a dialectical balancing act in which one strives for various perfections, always falling short, yet sometimes achieving a liveable harmony of competing narrative threads and criteria' (1990, 8).

In summary:

> The narrative inquirer focuses on the fact that the relational, temporal, and continuous features of Dewey's ontology of experience are manifested in narrative form, not just in retrospective representations of human experience, but in the lived immediacy of that experience.
>
> (Clandinin, 2006, 51)

It is clear that stories have not only micro-significance for the teller and the other participants in the conversation, but also macro-significance to a culture tied to context (Mishler, 1986, 94-5) producing 'culturally shared meanings' (Mishler, 1986, 95). This has relevance in terms of the gendered focus of the current study because, as women, the participants will share certain cultural conventions and also as improvisers, as inhabitants of London and so on (culture tied to context), thus creating metaphorical Venn diagrams of overlapping cultural contexts that create similarities. Therefore, the interpretation needs to account for the coherence relations not just in the stories of the individuals, but across the similarities between the individuals, whilst also attending to difference so as not to create a universalising drive towards a singular female experience of improvisation. It can be said that interpretation and meaning making relies on 'intuitive grounds of shared cultural understandings' (Mishler, 1986, 95) and that this is unavoidable and why there is a need to add to the text with declarations of context and specificity. This is where the traditional anthropological mode of observing another culture as an 'outsider' fails as can be seen in the example of Chagnon (cited above). In narrative inquiry the analyst:

> Makes explicit pronomial or elliptical references to other material as well as to presumably shared knowledge between the participants, and introduces factual material from other parts of the interview or from general knowledge of the world.
>
> (Mishler, 1986, 95)

This explicitness needs to be conducted to the analyst's best understanding (Mishler, 1986, 95). A narrative inquiry is a collaborative one, much like the practice of impro. In the case of this research project, the interdisciplinary methodology that includes self-ethnographic aspects means that I am fully embedded as a research object within the study which will become a richly complex emergent conversation between a variety of female experiences of improvisation. The researcher's input reveals her personal interest and the nature of the research project both in the self-ethnographic material and in conducting the interviews (Mishler, 1986, 97). The questions that the interviewer asks are 'embedded in and enter into the evolving discourse of the interview' (Mishler, 1986, 98) and are, therefore, also analytical material for the research project.

4.6 Methods, Ethics

The frame of the data collection is the female experience of impro, both my own, and that of others. This doubling requires several methods of data collection. The first method is that of journaling which encompasses the action research of noticing and improving my own practice as a female improviser as well as a self-ethnographic take on my own experience of being a female improviser. The journal also records, as a participant observer, my observation of other improvisers that I play with. Further to this data collection will be an unstructured interview/ conversation between myself and three groups of three other women improvisers and, subject to their approval, a contextualisation of their practice of improvisation through basic biographical details. These women have been selected from a range of improvisation contexts in London; one of the founding members of The Spontaneity Shop (see page 110) and two of her veteran and highly experienced improvisation colleagues who used to improvise regularly but now mainly teach; three women from the commercially and critically successful improvised musical, Showstopper (see page 107), and three women from a regularly performing improvisation group, The Institute (see page 105). In terms of the design of the interview, I hope to negotiate two hours with each group at a time and location that is convenient for them in Central London. I will provide refreshment and a quiet, comfortable room in order for the interviewees to feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible and will, in all three interviews, adopt a fairly low profile, asking few questions about their experience of improvising. As Baz Kershaw states of his data collection method, 'the focus groups were designed to encourage interaction between members, and the interviews to be as '"free-form" as possible, with the researcher generally taking a low profile throughout: "the intention was to produce [a] practice that simultaneously elicited and attended to the stories being voiced"' (Kershaw, 2002, 140). I will make every effort not to steer the conversation in any particular way and to that end I will respond in an emergent manner if questions are deemed necessary to encourage the conversation to move forward. All of the intended participants have had at least some prior contact with me, though in varying degrees so it will be necessary to contextualise the extent of this prior contact in each individual case. In fact, as all of the interviewees are interconnected in some way or other, a diagram will be used to illustrate this (see page 101). Great care is taken to draft the initial contact email with the participants in order not to frame the research question to them explicitly whilst remaining ethical and a contract is drawn up in order to satisfy the ethics of the project.

Clandinin characterises an ethics of narrative inquiry as 'being about negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices' (Clandinin, 2006, 52) and calls for

researchers to conduct research that makes a positive difference even if small (Clandinin, 2006, 52-3). The British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (British Sociological Association, 2002) states that sociological research has the potential to contribute to well-being in society (British Sociological Association, 2002, 2) but only if ethical research is practised. To this end it is important to engage in the potential ethical issues involved in this research here and develop an ethical framework. The findings must be accurate and truthful and the consequences of the work must be considered (British Sociological Association, 2002, 2). In the case of this research, the act of asking participants to focus on aspects of gender in their work as improvisers might impact upon their work in the future as it might lead them to think in new ways. In this respect it is important to create open channels of communication post-interview in order to offer support or clarification if necessary and gather offered new insights from participants' own reflections. It is necessary to create a contract for the protection of the participants and the knowledge and material that they endow to the project (see appendix Two) along with an awareness on the part of the researcher that she is entering into, developing or changing relationships with those studied and that a responsibility towards those relationships comes with this (British Sociological Association, 2002, 2). The research needs to be conducted with informed consent (British Sociological Association, 2002, 3). In this case I need to carefully explain the research in preliminary email contact with the proposed subjects (see appendix Two) without pre-determining outcomes or pre-supposing shared opinions. It is also necessary in this email to clarify participants' right to refuse participation at any point in the process and their right to complete anonymity by refusing audio recording of the interviews (British Sociological Association, 2002, 3). It is made clear to participants in both emails and the contract that they have the right to alter, clarify or add to their contributions, see transcripts and make changes to the uses made of their contributions within the data analysis section of the PhD (British Sociological Association, 2002, 3-4). Participants are told clearly that their agreement and the signed contract is only for the use of their contributions within the unpublished PhD thesis and that any further proposed use of their contributions beyond that will need to acquire their further signed consent (British Sociological Association, 2002, 5). The issue of anonymity within the text of the PhD is a question in this case, due to the contextualisation with personal and professional details required for the methodology of research. It will be necessary to get approval of the inclusion of these details. Because the participants are professional theatre performers, many of their personal and professional details are available to me online and in books. Particular consent to use real names and details that could serve as identifying factors will need to be sought from each individual. On the other hand, it is anticipated that the participants will recognise the potential value of being subjects of academic research in terms of their professional profiles, but this will need to be established on individual basis with each participant. In fact, the women selected as case studies and for

interview have waived their rights to anonymity as research subjects. In many research scenarios this would be inappropriate but in this case all the subjects are professional performers and improvisers with public profiles. The ethics release forms (see appendix Two) includes a separate signature for the statement; 'I am happy for professional and biographical information that is in the public domain (i.e. on the internet, in books or in newspaper/ magazine reviews) to be linked to my quotes and identity within the research report' thus the participants have the option to particiate with anonymity but all choose not to take this option.

Elliot Mishler proposes that the interview is a form of discourse (Mishler, 1986, vii) and that the record of the interview is a representation of this discourse which is created between interviewer and interviewee. He states; 'how we make that representation and the analytical procedures we apply to it reveal our theoretical assumptions and presuppositions about relations between discourses and meaning' (Mishler, 1986, vii). In other words, the interviewer's own context and assumptions as well as the interviewees' cannot be removed from the picture and, therefore, must be made visible and extant as these issues of context are central to the expression and understanding of meaning (Mishler, 1986, viii). Mishler proposes that interviews are speech events, that the discourse of the interview is constructed jointly by interviewers and interviewees, that the analysis and interpretation of the collected data are both based on a theory of discourse and meaning and that the meanings of both questions and answers are contextually grounded (Mishler, 1986, ix). Mishler criticises question and answer based interview technique as leading interviewees, not allowing for variance and nuance (in the case of restricted answer possibilities), being dissociated from any kind of context whether personal, social or cultural and as omitting to pay attention to the importance of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Mishler, 1986, 20-23). Mishler champions the unstructured interview (Mishler, 1986, 29). Mishler cites Lofland as stating 'I would say that successful interviewing is not unlike carrying on unthreatening, self-controlled, supportive, polite, and cordial interaction in everyday life' (Mishler, 1986, 29-30). The unstructured interview is 'governed by social norms that depend on trust, mutuality and openness to the potential for intimacy that comes with shared disclosure of beliefs and values' (Mishler, 1986, 30). Structured interviews are more 'asymmetric and hierarchical [...] interviewers initiate topics, direct the flow of talk, decide when a response is adequate, and only interviewees disclose their views' (Mishler, 1986, 30). In the case of the design of the interview for this research, choosing to conduct an unstructured interview/conversation between myself and a group of female improvisers will, hopefully, still further erase the hierarchical nature of the researcher/subject paradigm. Mishler cites Oakley calling for a feminist approach to research that calls for a detailed description of the process of the interview that gathers the data (Mishler, 1986, 30-31), again, a form of "thick description". Traditionally, what context to

include and exclude within the research report has developed through a dominant masculine paradigm which manifests in only a charade of objectivity and neutrality and that masks oppressive and dominant power relations (Mishler, 1986, 31). Mishler, again citing Oakley; '"A feminist methodology [...] requires, further, that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives"' (Mishler, 1986, 31). This is why this research has consciously decided not to interview male improvisers about either their own experience of improvising, or their experience of working with female improvisers. Whilst in itself this would be very interesting, the dynamic issues of a female researcher organising a conversation between male interviewees would potentially affect responses adversely through her very presence for, as Oakley states, 'a feminist interviewing women is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing' (Oakley, 1981, 57). Mixed gender speech events are very different to homogenous gender speech events (Tannen, 1994) and unpicking these issues is not possible within this particular research project, the intention here is to focus on the female experience of improvising.

4.7 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was first articulated as a form of qualitative data analysis for social researchers by Ansem Strauss and Barney Glaser in the 1960s. They originated it because 'Previous books on methods of social research have focused mainly on how to verify theories [...] a resultant de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area that one wishes to research' (Strauss & Glaser, 1967, 1-2). This liberated researchers to allow the theory to derive from the data rather than forcing the data to verify or deny an existing theory. This new method allowed theories to generate through the research thereby moving away from a Cartesian empiricism and towards an emergent discovery. This method is very suited to research in the Arts as it is moving away from a paradigm of 'verification as the chief mandate for excellent research' (Strauss & Glaser, 1967, 2) and, therefore, allows the research process to move away from a starting point of a priori assumptions because 'categories are discovered by examination of the data' (Strauss & Glaser, 1967, 3). This gives the data primacy in the research process and enables the research to enter many types of data into the data set. 'Grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data' (Strauss & Glaser, 1967, 5) in contrast with logico-deductive theory which serves a more scientific model than would suit social research and particularly the arts.

The data that is collected will be analysed through a methodology of grounded theory whereby themes are drawn out from the data set through a process of generalisation from the specificity of each piece of data. As Borgatti states; 'the phrase [...] refers to theory that is developed inductively from a corpus of data. If done well this means that the resulting theory at least fits one dataset perfectly' (Borgatti, n.d.). I will examine the data to see what themes emerge from within it that are common to the lived experience of improvising for the female improvisers in question thereby using 'categories drawn from the respondents themselves [with a] focus on making implicit belief systems explicit' (Borgatti, n.d.). This is done through reading and re-reading a data set which can consist of any material (Borgatti, n.d.). In this case the data set will consist of a self-interview and practice journal notes, three interview conversations with sets of female improvisers, the internet blog of Patti Stiles that is themed around impro and an oral history chapter on impro and gender. Essentially anything and everything can be considered as data in a grounded theory based research. In this case the data set is closed to anything further in order to make finite the research. This reading will discover variables (categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships in the data, termed 'theoretical sensitivity' (Borgatti, n.d.). The first stage is 'open coding' where the data is taken sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph and phenomena contained therein is identified, named and categorised (Borgatti, n.d.). The search is conducted to answer the question 'what is this about?' or 'what is being referenced here? This is the first level of abstraction; 'after coding much text, some new categories are invented, grounded theorists do not normally go back to the earlier text to code for that category' (Borgatti, n.d.). However, theorists create memos (known as memoing) from these initial categories that form the core of the reporting later. After this level concepts are chosen that best fit with the tentative core themes that have been extracted, termed 'selective coding'; 'the essential idea is to create a single storyline around which everything else is draped. There is a belief that such a core concept always exists [...] Selective coding is about finding the driver that impels the story forward' (Borgatti, n.d.). In this case I will be asking; what is the story of these female improvisers whose data I am selecting and what are the common themes? Borgatti warns: 'It should be noted that a fallacy of some grounded theory work is that they take a respondent's understanding of what causes what as truth. That is, they see the informant as an insider expert, and the model they create is really the informant's folk model' (Boragtti, n.d.). This distinction is crucial to the distilling out of a general theme from these subjugated knowers. Grounded theory seems to be a highly successful method through which to reveal, examine and state subjugated knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden and undervalued. In wondering at the outset of this research process what it was that drew me and kept drawing me to improvise I wanted to explore a subjugated knowledge. Grounded theory provides me with the opportunity to examine this knowledge from beyond the self and see if other (female)

improvisers hold similar themes in their subjugated knowledges. These themes can then be further abstracted into hypotheses through theoretical coding to see the meta-themes that exist within the narratives that the female improvisers offer to the data I am collecting. This allows me to confirm or critique my original inkling that impro creates well-being through access to liminal ludic communitas for its participants.

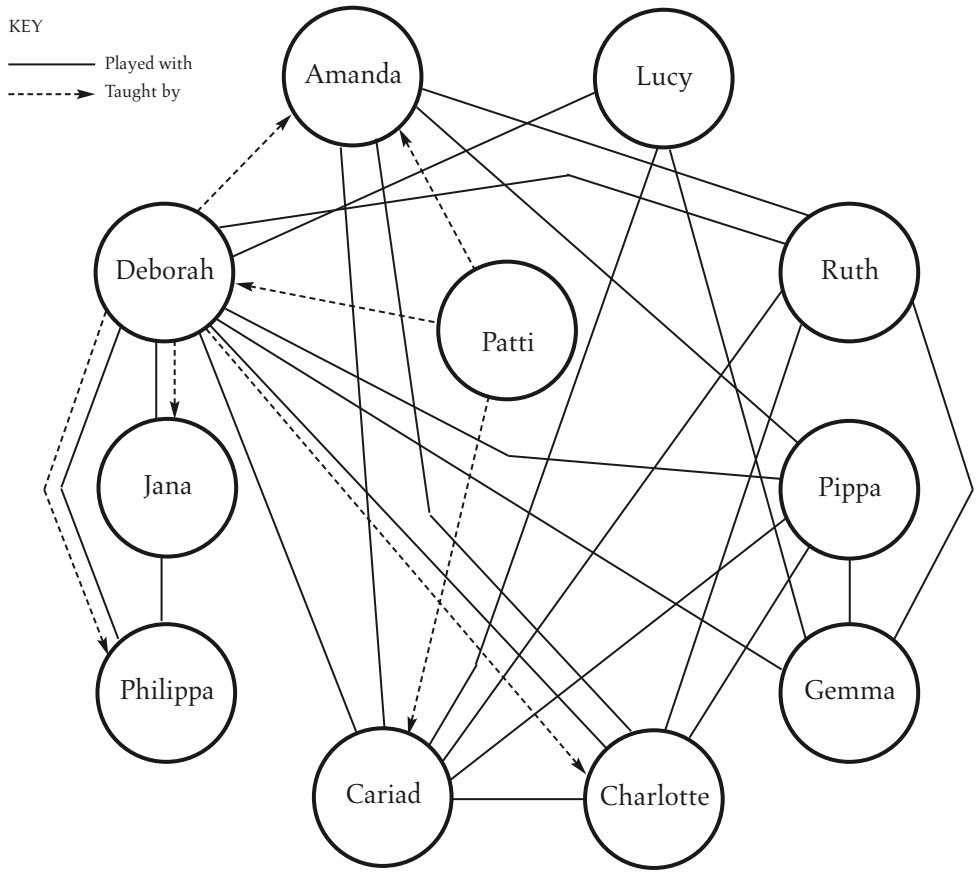
4.8 Summary

In summary, this research project uses an interdisciplinary action research methodology – framed in a Foucauldian dialectic of dominance and power – where I am reflecting on my own, and others phenomenological experience of impro through the frame of the literature. For collection and analysis of data I utilise the strategies of the unstructured/semi-structured interview, journalling, self-ethnography and participant observation. I am applying the methods of grounded theory to this data, open coding and memoing, in order to develop the themes that are discoverable in the data. From the analysis of the data, in dialogue with the literature, I am developing and bringing together these themes in order to address the concerns and questions of the research. These disciplines emerge from a non-positivist Social Science paradigm of phenomenology and hermeneutics as applied to ethnography, whereby the declaration of the researcher's own experience disallows for an objective or neutral stance thereby ironing out the hierarchical nature of research. The research itself has developed hermeneutically; as I delve into the detail of the subject of impro it becomes clear that this seemingly marginal and small area of performance research is actually a vast and complexly overlapping topic that needs to be kept within tight parameters for the purpose of the research. Each time I return to the subject, after narrowing the area of concern during one turn of the hermeneutic spiral, I have greater and deeper understanding of both the position of impro in relation to the dominant theatres and my own practice of impro. The practice and the research are so intricately woven as to be inseparable as they both inform and respond to the deeper understandings that arise as a result of the hermeneutic research process. Analysis of the collected data is sited within a feminist frame and takes into account the notion of affinity and difference of the array of female narratives and voices within the experience of female impro, 'as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society' (Oakley, 1981, 48-49). This collection of data on the experience of improvising as a woman in the frame of a patriarchal capitalist society is then used to reflect upon the position of impro within the frame of the 'official' theatre canon.

Chapter Five The Players

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I set out the biographical contexts for myself and the other improvisers in the case study. I also look at the historical, theatrical origins of impro as well as its current context and especially the context of the improvisatory practice of myself and the case studies. I will draw out some of the key figures and practitioners of improvisatory forms in a roughly chronological order leading up to the current UK context of impro in which the participants of the study are firmly rooted.



Performance/learning relationships between the case studies

Figure One: The Interrelationships Between the Female Case Studies

Figure 1 shows how these female impro practitioners are all interrelated either because they have been taught by or performed with each other, thereby demonstrating a community of players.

All of the players have performed in the Improvathon, except Philippa and Jana. I have performed in Improvathons with Cariad, Ruth, Charlotte and Pippa. Deborah has appeared in an Improvathon with Lucy, Ruth, Pippa, Gemma, Cariad and Charlotte and Patti has appeared in Improvathons in Canada and Australia.

5.2 The researcher's (My) Experience of Impro and Subud

I became involved with performance and the performing arts at degree level when I studied *Visual and Performing Arts* at Brighton University. This continued at MA level at Surrey University where I studied Dance. I was very used to an embodied mode of performance that utilised the body's ability to make meaning and communicate with an audience. In 2004 I did a workshop with New York-based improviser Richmond Shepherd and again in 2005. I explored the format of improvisation games both in workshop and several performance contexts, but, as I had not yet encountered the work of Keith Johnstone, I could not understand why the games were not going anywhere more satisfying than the odd successful joke and the audience's joy at seeing a group of performers 'make it up' as they went along. After I read Johnstone's first book, I attended a workshop led by him in 2007 and the possibilities of improvised storytelling became apparent. I then started regular weekly classes in 2008 with The Spontaneity Shop, the only organisation in London to train Johnstone-based improvisation (the founders having been taught by Patti Styles who trained at Johnstone's Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary). I joined their Level Two class (Level One is for complete beginners to improvisation), did two eight week terms, and two public performances. Beyond the classes, some of the participants formed a group called Impromptu Theatre and we did several extra public performances including taking part in a competitive format called Theatresports with some of London's top improvisation teams. The Spontaneity Shop have a Level Three class which is by invitation only, and participants have to do at least two Level Two classes before being asked to join this semi-professional group. In Level Three there are three performances scheduled during each eight week block of training sessions so the participants get a chance to perform and get feedback. I have completed three blocks of Level Three training. I now consider myself to be a fairly experienced performing improviser but I am very aware that I still 'internally police' (Boyce-Tillman, 2007, pp25-26) myself and that this impedes my development as an improviser as I censor myself before I act on my impulses out of a fear of 'getting it wrong', coming from a place of wanting to protect the ego. Becoming more experienced and visible as an improviser has given me the opportunity to be involved with the Improvathon, a durational, episodic improvised soap opera that continues in two-hourly episodes for various lengths of time no less that twenty-three hours and no more (yet) than seventy-two. I have performed a ten-hour shift at the Bristol Improvathon 2010, a twenty-three hour Improvathon and the Liverpool Improvathon, 2011 and 2012, a thirty-three hour Improvathon where I performed for the entire time. Since moving to Bristol in 2010 I have been teaching improvisation from the Johnstone context to students at Circomedia – Centre for Contemporary Circus and Physical Performance on the Foundation Degree in *Contemporary Circus and Physical Performance*. My

early experiences of impro and the desire to understand and improve my own practice as an improviser have led me to undertake this research at doctoral level. I am also in the process of developing impro and mask as tools for continuing professional development for actors.

It is also necessary to declare my spiritual practice as I feel that it is this aspect of my life that has helped to lead me into the field of impro and is an area of my life where I also experience communitas. Whilst this thesis unavoidably utilises the discourse of the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian heteropatriarchal tradition within which it sits, my experience and ontology of being has had a life-long influence from Subud, a spiritual organisation and meditational practice that has originated from a Javanese mystical and Sufi Muslim sect combinatory origin (Geels, 1997). The experience of growing up in Subud and as an adult practising the spiritual exercise of Subud has given me an experience of community that I recognised within the western secular practice of impro as it is described in the thesis. My lived experience of communitas prior to discovering impro was through the organisation of Subud and in fact I discovered impro through a Subud member in New York, Richmond Shepherd. My lived experience of spontaneity is the spiritual practice of Subud which has no set ritual or form and happens in the moment without planning. Subud is an acronym of the Sanskrit word Susila Budhi Dharma meaning 'right action with all your parts awakened in accordance with the nature of things' (Weightman, 2000, 62).

Cited in Simon Weightman's series of lectures at SOAS, *Mysticism and the Metaphor of Energies* is an experience, which I have often had, related by a contributor to The Religious Experience Research Archives at University of Wales, Lampeter:

> One day I was sweeping the stairs, down in the house in which I was working, when suddenly I was overcome, overwhelmed, saturated...with a sense of the most sublime and living *love*. It not only affected me, but seemed to bring everything around me to life. The brush in my hand, my dustpan, the stairs, seemed to come alive with love. I seemed no longer me, with my petty troubles and trial, but part of this infinite power of love, so utterly and overwhelmingly wonderful that I knew at once what the saints had grasped. It could only have been a minute or two, yet for that brief particle of time it seemed eternity.
>
> (Weightman, 2000, 68-9)

I have had similar experiences whilst on 'auto-pilot' and engaged is some everyday activity such as driving or cooking. When participants 'let go' or surrender in a similar way when improvising a similarly euphoric experience can occur with similarly spiritual feelings attached to it.

Weightman's lecture series is 'attempting to establish categories for mysticism which could operate across traditions [...] and which could connect, somehow, transcendent and mystical experience to one's own experience' (Weightman, 2000, 82). In the context of his

lectures he is using the word 'transcendent' to mean experiences that are more than 'everyday', that transcend everyday consciousness, and he seeks to define a phenomenology of experience that can encapsulate both the epistemological and ontological approaches to the typography of mystical experience (Weightman, 2000, 84). He does this through applying J. G. Bennett's model of Unity and Multiplicity.

According to Weightman, who is also a practising Subud member, Bennett's model makes whole the duality inherent in the two approaches to exploring mystical experience - the modernist and the postmodernist. The modernist approach holds that there is an common core to all mystical experience regardless of the tradition the experiencer adheres to and the postmodernism position is that mysticism, like everything, is not outside of language and is, therefore, simply a form of discourse and is contextual (Weightman, 2000, 7-12). According to Weightman the study of mysticism to date has been split between the postmodernist relative constructionists and the modernist essential perennialists. This conflict between unity and multiplicity is, according to Weightman, dealt with by Bennett's construction as it seeks to accommodate both essentialist and relativistic approaches, It is both/and; there is 'multiplicity in every unity and unity in every multiplicity [...] reality in all appearance and appearance in all reality' (Weightman, 2000, 15). This phenomenology of mystical experience is the use of metaphorical descriptions of internal, emotional and subjective experiences and observations of the self and is, therefore, a methodology of reflexive practice in line with the Socratic notion that the unexamined life is not worth living.

J.G Bennett was a follower of George Gurdjieff (a spiritual teacher of the early twentieth century) and Ouspensky (a Russian esotericist) and was somewhat responsible for bringing Subud to the west in the 1950s. Pak Subuh, the Indonesian mystic who began the Subud movement was invited by Bennett to England where a following formed as people began to practice the spiritual exercise that Pak Subuh had spontaneously received. This practice consists of quietening oneself and then following whatever movements, sounds and experiences arise for half an hour, two or three times a week, either with a group or alone. There is no special trick or learning necessary, but most people experience surrendering their will to a higher power that is usually perceived to be God (either Judeo-Christian or Muslim). Personally, I have been practising this spiritual exercise for twenty-one years and have come to my own understanding that at these moments when I surrender and 'let go' I am reconnecting with the divine, universal consciousness of unconditional love. This Subud exercise is far from the only way of encountering this and in fact, I propose that complicit communitas is any activity that can conjure this effect. In impro this occurs through the principle of 'yes-anding', saying yes to each other and creating together.

5.3 The Interviewees and Their Context

In this section I will contextualise the interviewees, setting out their experience and provenance in impro. I have chosen to use their first names in the text of this chapter rather than surnames in order to personalise their presence in the thesis.

5.3.1 The Institute

At its inception in 2005 The Institute was called The London Scientific Institute of Improvisuology but was quickly shortened to The Institute. The Institute started as a group of seven, performing a single charity show at The Canal Cafe Theatre in London. After being involved together in a different show in Edinburgh, Cariad Lloyd and Paul Foxcroft decided to create a more permanent group and they began by presenting three late-night Theatresports shows at the Edinburgh Festival in 2005. On their return to London they began mounting weekly shows at The Canal Café Theatre as the resident improvisation group under the name of The Institute and with the by-line 'we make up funny. Pretty damn frequently' (The Institute, n.d.). Cariad states that they had 'no experience, no knowledge of what we were doing, and that's how you do it because if you knew how hard it was you wouldn't do it' (interview transcript). The group was mainly female, 'that was not intentional I just knew better women [improvisers] than I did men' (Cariad, interview transcript), and did short-form improvisation based around games, Keith Johnstone's *Impro* (1989) and the memory of *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (Channel Four, 1988). According to their internet page the intention was to 'create stories, characters and worlds out of raw imagination for people to enjoy and digest' (The Institute, n.d.). The members of the group consisted of actors, improvisers and stand-up comedians (The Institute, n.d.). The Institute ceased functioning as a group in 2009. The last show they did as The Institute was as part of the Theatresports Cup that I produced where they fielded a team consisting of Cariad Lloyd, Gemma Whelan and Charlotte Gittins.

5.3.2 Cariad Lloyd

Cariad began improvising after doing a ten-week introduction to comedy impro course at the City Lit in 2005. The course was run by Mark Phoenix, who works with Fluxx[16]. She classes this as her only formal training in impro though she did do an improvised show whilst at Sussex University where she studied English and Drama. Cariad states that Phoenix taught Keith Johnstone's method of improvisation, working from *Impro*. After this she 'just started doing impro' (interview transcript) and formed The Institute with fellow improviser and Spontaneity

[16] Fluxx Improvisation is a theatre company founded by Chris Johnston, author of *The Improvisation Game* (2006). A detailed engagement with their very interesting work in the impro field is beyond the remit of this thesis. More information can be found here http://www.fluxx.co.uk/#!about/c10fk

Shop graduate,Paul Foxcroft. Due to her success with The Institute and reputation as a highly skilled improviser she has worked with many different groups including The Scat Pack and Showstopper as well as travelling to Canada to perform in Improvathons, endurance long-form improvised soap operas where the improvisers improvise for up to seventy four hour stretches (see page 114). Cariad talks of her experience of performing in the 2008 London Improvathon and the liminal transitional space she encountered, 'it did result in me losing all concept of reality for the next 45 hours. To the point where I had to be carried off the stage as I seemed to think I was watching telly and could shout out when I thought things were going wrong' (Bertrand, 2008). She also speaks of another performer subverting the theatrical space during an Improvathon 'An amazing Canadian improviser called Kurt Smeaton was playing a croupier called Jeff Bouldernuts. But during scenes he kept slipping back into being Kurt saying he could see an audience and a theatre, and then going back to Jeff who thought he was in the casino. It ended in him having a fight with himself, Jeff vs. Kurt over which reality was true, the theatre or the casino, till eventually he actually physically broke the fourth wall' (Bertrand, 2008). In an interview, Cariad expresses her view of the revelatory nature of impro, 'as in impro, as in life'; 'just because it's so interesting to realise whatever you struggle with in life, comes out in impro, if you don't listen for example, it will show in your scenes, and impro can help to identify that, and even more amazingly change you' (Bertrand, 2008). Cariad is also a professional actor with many theatre credits and a film credit as well as writing and starring in sketches filmed by the Blaine Brothers.

5.3.3 Gemma Whelan

Gemma started improvising with Ken Campbell in 2005 for two years, in what became The School of Night, both performing and workshopping. The School of Night is an improvised show based on Campbell's interest in the 'conspiracy theory' of who really wrote Shakespeare's oeuvre (The Sticking Place, n.d.). School of Night performances raise the following questions 'what if you really could summon the Ancient Muses? What if you could extemporize everything from Homer to Shakespeare to Pinter? What if making stuff up is just more entertaining than writing it down?' (The Sticking Place, n.d.). Through this Gemma met many other improvisers and joined The Institute after getting involved as an audience member during their first Edinburgh gigs. She states, 'we won competitions [...] it was pretty magic and fun' (interview transcript). Gemma trained at the London Studio Centre as an actor in musical theatre and is now a professional dancer and actor, with credits in film, television and theatre. She is also an award-winning character-based stand-up comic. Reviewer Steve Bennett says of her comedy work; '[she] appeared in character as Chastity Butterworth, a prim, buttoned-down, well-spoken, schoolma'amish spinster from another era. Think Julie Andrews performing comedy, and you're on the right lines. With cut-glass accent she took us through jokes – a

series of painful puns made silly by her oh-so proper delivery – a rather scatological section that belied her mannered exterior – and even some poems. She's combines the daft puns of a female Tim Vine with the persona of an emotionally frigid posh-boy comic like Will Smith, and the effect is most impressive'(Bennet, 2010).

5.3.4 Charlotte Gittins

Charlotte trained as an improviser at The Spontaneity Shop, but had a previous memorable experience of a drama teacher at school who introduced her to improvisation long before she actually began to improvise as an adult (interview transcript). Charlotte studied for an MA in Theatre at The Central School of Speech and Drama where improvisation was not explored as 'the performance tutors just sort of despised it' (interview transcript). Charlotte began to improvise with The Institute in 2006. Charlotte does not class herself as a professional actor as she is a television producer who does occasional acting as well as professional voiceover work and radio. Charlotte joined The Institute when she began a relationship with Paul Foxcroft after meeting him on The Spontaneity Shop improvisation course and subsequently attending one of The Institute's open workshops where her talent for improvising was recognised. Charlotte's brother is also an improviser who trained at The Spontaneity Shop and along with some other Spontaneity Shop members they set up Improbubble, a short-form improvisation group performing monthly at the Hen and Chickens Theatre in London. Charlotte has also appeared in several Improvathons.

5.3.5 Showstopper! The Improvised Musical

Showstopper, like the Improvathon, was a Ken Campbell initiative. It began as a workshop at the Actors' Centre in London with the purpose of performing a full-length extemporised musical within a week (Showstopper, n.d.). The success of this first show inspired Dylan Emery and Adam Megiddo to develop the form with a flexible pool of performers and weekly training made possible due to financial backing (Showstopper, n.d.). The aim of Showstopper is to create 'shows that are not just funny, but can be frightening, exciting and moving [and is] part of the Sticking Place's ongoing commitment to re-invent improvisation as a theatrical art form for the 21st century (Showstopper, n.d.). Having attended several shows and workshops I can describe the format from experience. An actor is on stage playing the role of the director, they pretend that Cameron Macintosh has called them on their mobile to ask when the new musical they are supposed to have been writing will be ready for him to read. In a panic the director asks the audience for a theme, a title, and five musical styles. This is a successful way of asking for audience suggestions whilst still being in the meta-narrative of the theatrical experience. The implication is that what is about to be improvised will be handed to Macintosh as the book

of the musical and in fact the aim of Showstopper is to improvise the perfect musical that could be put on a West End stage without changing a thing (interview transcript). Once these suggestions have been collected the improvisers will come onstage and start the opening number that sets the scene and the main characters. All of these aspects are emerging from the improvised material and the audience is seeing all of the creative process, there are no decisions made off-stage. At points during the performance the director will freeze the action and call for a musical number based on the styles previously suggested by the audience. The director can also call for certain scenes, erases things that have just happened if he or she feels that the plot calls for it but the majority of the time the material is generated complicitly by the improvisers onstage. The show is award-winning and regularly receives five star reviews 'it bordered on the inspired. When improvisation was in full flow it was just captivating watching the performers pluck rhymes out of the air' (Showstopper, n.d.). A review of this year's Edinburgh run by Corry Shaw states, 'the most impressive thing about the show is the cast and crew's ability to work together as a single unit and seemingly a single mind, with coordinated lighting, choreography and harmonies that are lacking in even some of the most polished pre-planned comedy shows on the Fringe' (Shaw, 2010). Theatre critic Tim Arthur describes the same experience the author had when attending an Improvised Musical workshop run by Dylan and some of the Showstopper cast:

> Dylan picked up a guitar and began to strum casually, beckoning me to join him with a nod of his head. 'All right, Tim. Let's have a go at this, shall we? We'll give you an opening line and let's see how you do at creating a song. Keep it simple. Try and tell a story. Don't worry about it rhyming. And when you get to a chorus hit one long note so we know you're there – make it catchy so we can all remember it and join in
>
> (Time Out, 2008)

The training that the cast of Showstopper undergo equips them with techniques for creating improvised songs within recognisable musical structures as well as training the storytelling and character creation skills that all improvisers learn. The Showstopper 'product' is long-form improvisation which differs from short-form in that it tells one over-arching story throughout the show with sub-plots and episodes or chapters and is, therefore, a slightly different skill and training, although there are many cross-overs and transferable skills between long and short – form improvisatory techniques. Showstopper have also had a primetime Radio Four comedy show (2011).

5.3.6 Pippa Evans

Pippa did a lot of drama at school, including Theatre Studies A Level. She states, 'all I ever wanted to do was perform' (interview transcript). She had a drama teacher who did a lot of

improvisation with the students and she watched *Whose Line is it Anyway?* on television. When she was sixteen Ken Campbell, with whom she then went on to work for ten years later, came to her school to do a workshop with the pupils. On finishing school Pippa spent a gap year doing stand-up comedy but, realising that there was little she had to offer as an eighteen year old with limited life experience (interview transcript), she went to university to study drama where she also developed her singing talent, ran a talent night, played guitar and wrote songs. After university she decided she wanted to become and actress and did a lot of Theatre in Education projects before getting a part in a musical called *The Sawdust Circle* that went to the Edinburgh Festival. Whilst Pippa thought that the script was quite good, the experience of being in a production with some not very nice people put her off to a great extent. When she was on the Royal Mile dressed as a clown doing publicity stunts for the show and handing out leaflets she bumped into Lloyd Stevens who at the time was running Improvedy. As she had previously helped Lloyd to devise a play and he knew she was adept at improvising he suggested she do some more. At this point, in Edinburgh, she was not enjoying the experience of a scripted musical and he suggested that she come and join Improvedy on her return to London and start improvising again. After a time with Improvedy, Pippa joined Ruth Bratt in Scratch and here was finding that experience of impro was also helping her to get other paid acting jobs. Pippa joined the Ken Campbell directed *School of Night* where she met Adam Megiddo who suggested she join Showstopper Pippa is also a successful character comic, with her shows *Pippa Evans and Other Lonely People* (2009) and *Loretta Maine: I'm not Drunk I just Need to Talk to You* (2010).

5.3.7 Ruth Bratt

Ruth did American Studies at University with no plans to be a performer. This changed after a period of time studying in America. She took some acting classes there and the tutor said 'you must be an actor, you must be' (interview transcript). When Ruth graduated she studied acting for a year at The Bridge before becoming a serious professional actor for four years. She found she was getting very little work and after the end of a relationship she took a stand-up comedy show to Edinburgh. While in Edinburgh she was invited to join a seventy-four hour Improvathon as a guest performer. Following this she joined an impro group called Improvedy that is no longer in existence [internet] and then left to start her own company, Scratch. At Improvedy Ruth had met Dylan Emery, founder of Showstopper, who asked her repeatedly to come and join his improvised musical group. She really wanted to join but only had experience of singing 'rubbish songs in Improvedy and Scratch which generally we'd just end up going "brah ra rah!"' (interview transcript). Emery persisted, calling Ruth and saying '"you have to come and do it this weekend. We've got a workshop this weekend and if you get on with everyone you've got three shows next week"' (interview transcript). Ruth recalls being in a

'yes-and' mood and took a leap into the unknown world of the improvised musical. She had become tired of being an actor waiting for work and realised that both stand-up experience and improvisation experience would set her aside from all the other twenty-something actresses 'you've just got all these things that suddenly make you more interesting to casting directors' (interview transcript). Ruth also guests with Grand Theft Impro and still performs with Scratch as well as having performed in many Improvathons. She also has recently voiced parts for BBC Three's *Mongrels* (2010) and has a double act with Lucy Trodd-Senton.

5.3.8 Lucy Trodd-Senton

Lucy studied for a degree in Performing Arts at Middlesex University where she had the opportunity to use improvisation as a tool for devising but not Theatresports or long form improvisation formats. On graduation Lucy was very successful at auditions and got TV roles initially, but then the jobs stopped and she began temping and went into film and music video production. She was still doing the odd acting workshop but it was not until a friend suggested that she '"do more workshops and actually do some acting"' (interview transcript) that she attended a Ken Campbell workshop at The Actor's Centre. Ken immediately invited Lucy to go with him to Brighton the very next day where she performed in an improvised musical about Hurricane Katrina. Here she met Sean McCann and learned from him about the long-form soaps in Canada (such as Dienasty) going there to try a fifty hour Improvathon. After this Lucy worked with Ken Campbell for three years, was in The Institute and became involved with Showstopper through meeting Adam Megiddo and Oliver Senton (now her husband) whilst working with Campbell who also influenced the development of Showstopper until he died in 2008.

5.3.9 The Spontaneity Shop

The Spontaneity Shop was formed by Deborah Frances-White and Tom Salinsky in 2001 to teach and perform improvisation and use it as a tool for corporate training. They have also taught at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, The Actors Centre and The Central School of Speech and Drama. The workshop structure at The Spontaneity Shop has three levels. Level one is for absolute beginners and teaches the basics of improvising using Johnstone's methods and techniques. This is either an eight week course or can be run over two weekends. Following this attendees can go on to do the Level Two course which advances some of the basic techniques and culminates in a performance using Keith Johnstone's Micetro format where players are eliminated to leave a 'winner'. After at least two level two workshop attendances and upon invitation, some improvisers get asked to join the level three group who work more intensively and critically and put on three shows per eight week term.

5.2.10 Deborah Frances-White

Deborah was introduced to impro on television as a teenager in 1990s Australia where the channel ABC would show a virtually unedited Theatresports competition 'they recognised that what was wonderful about improvisation was the danger – the crash-and-burn failures as well as the moments of blinding genius' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 17). This introduction led Deborah to go weekly to the theatre to watch Theatresports live as well as taking classes and doing shows 'the audience […] would go crazy with excitement and anticipation […] I couldn't help contrasting the politely applauding middle-aged audience I saw at performing arts centers with this genuinely exciting event' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 18). Deborah became a regular judge at Theatresports 'I think I always had a head for what made the improvisation work' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 18). When Deborah came to London she looked for a similar improvisation scene and found London Theatresports 'it was a small fringe theatre with about fifteen people in the audience […] they were using a free format of improv games and scenes with an improvised play after the interval. It was fun but the crowd seemed only politely entertained and it was nothing like the atmosphere I'd been used to' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 19). She also attended workshops but unlike in Australia, gagging was encouraged; 'a drive to be as funny as you can be but in a way that disappointed me' (interview transcript). During this time she kept re-reading Johnstone's book, 'it was dawning on me that although the shows in London were entertaining, what I really wanted to be able to do was the sort of improvisation that was being described in the book with the sort of spirit that I'd seen at Brisbane Theatresports' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 19). On the verge of giving up, Deborah attended a workshop run by Patti Stiles who had worked very closely with Johnstone in Calgary and was the artistic director of Edmonton based Rapid Fire Theatre and a long running member of the Dienasty cast working closely with Dana Andersen. Deborah realised that Stiles could potentially 'unlock some of the secrets of the book' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 19). As Stiles was to be in London for a year Deborah arranged to have regular workshops with her and a small group of others and 'Patti systematically taught us how to improvise with enormous skill, understanding and patience' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 20) this contrasted with the workshops at London Theatresports where 'although most of the teachers knew how to set up an exercise or game, often they had no idea why it was going wrong or right' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 20). Deborah admits that 'I'm a much better teacher of improvisation than I am an improviser […] I've always just been able to see it from the outside and just deconstruct it […] and some naturally brilliant improvisers can't do that partly because they're so naturally brilliant that they don't know what they are doing [that makes it brilliant. Whereas] I can slightly let go, I can always pull it apart' (interview transcript). Deborah identifies that teaching improvisation well

is a specific skill that Stiles helped her to develop, 'she said to me at one point you've got it now and you have to stop watching what I'm teaching and start watching how I'm teaching […] because she knew she was handing it over'. This small group is what eventually became The Spontaneity Shop, Deborah and Tom Salinsky's business that combines improvisation workshops with shows and corporate training. Deborah states:

> Every part of my life has been changed for the better through improvisation. I'm more playful, more likely to say "yes" (even when I shouldn't), less frightened of doing new things, more in touch with my imagination and I love any sort of opportunity for performance.
>
> (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 20)

Deborah has successfully co-written (with Philippa Waller and Monica Henderson) screenplays that have sold to Fox Searchlight in Hollywood and has taken her own stand-up comedy shows to Edinburgh and on tour in the UK and Australia to critical acclaim. She states 'the success of those other creative pursuits come directly from my time in improvisation, where I learned to trust my "obvious", craft stories and become a fearless performer' (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, 21). Deborah feels that, while improvisation has given her so much both personally and professionally, she has no real desire to do it anymore. She describes two factors; vanity and quality:

> I'd got to the point with impro where I was frustrated that you could never control the quality […] like if you had a different cast or the cast weren't in the zone or someone didn't like the format or it wasn't really happening or we didn't have the right venue. There were just so many variables as to whether that show was going to be any good. We had one really fantastic season, I remember the work had been very good and we'd had a very good audience and then we had a really shitty season where […] it was like improvising through treacle.
>
> (interview transcript)

In terms of the vanity aspect to this Deborah states, 'sometimes I'd see middle-aged women improvising and I'd be like I don't want to be that because I think there is an age that you get to where there's something […] undignified about it. I got to the point where I just don't want to pretend to be a dog in the pub on a Wednesday night. I thought I was too old' (interview transcript).

5.3.11 Jana Carpenter

Jana is a professional actor who trained at Mountview Theatre School. For the first ten years of her acting career Jana was terrified of improvising (interview transcript). During the run of a play in Austria, Jana was asked perform in an improvised show by Jim Libby an actor and improviser who runs improvisation troupe The English Lovers in Vienna. She 'chickened out […] I was just "I do not understand how you can possibly stand up in front of people without any idea of what you are going to say"' (interview transcript). On her return to England she decided

to take some classes at The Spontaneity Shop. Deborah and Tom Salinsky invited Jana to join the company who was then performing an improvised format called *Tell Tales*, a series of interconnected monologues 'they asked me to come on to a show where the first half was scripted monologues and the second half was improvised monologues and so I […] improvised in the second half and it was the most exhilarating experience I ever had and I was like I've got to do this forever now' (interview transcript). She performed with the company for a few years, touring and doing The Edinburgh Festival before having some time out to accommodate motherhood. Recently she has been guesting with Tom Salinsky's new company Horse Aquarium and finds it nice 'to do little bits and pieces here and there and guest in other peoples shows' (interview transcript). Jana is also the lead singer in a band called Piefinger and has TV and film credits as an actor. Despite improvisation being a lower priority at the moment for Jana, when asked she states, 'I would love to get back into it because I really miss it. I really miss the buzz because there was a time when […] it was constantly in my life; gigs, rehearsals, and now it's very rarely there and I do feel a lack of it' (interview transcript).

5.3.12 Philippa Waller

Philippa trained as an actor at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) but it was not until she took some postgraduate classes there that she encountered impro. The class she took was taught by Deborah Frances-White and Philippa found that she took to improvisation straight away and that it suited her very well (interview transcript). She was invited to join The Spontaneity Shop's performance company. The first show she did was a long-form format called Triple Play based on the idea of the romantic comedy. 'I was absolutely terrified, but it wasn't even short-form, it was not only get up on stage and make it up but also hold that information in your head because you'll need it for the next scene and the following ten scenes after that. It was quite deep-end of the pool' (interview transcript). Philippa went on to perform all over the world with The Spontaneity Shop with their most successful show, *Dream Date*. The experience and training in improvisation has led to successful screenplay and scriptwriting for Philippa who writes with Deborah. 'improv for me very much so was storytelling turning into scriptwriting and I've now co-written a musical as well' (interview transcript). Philippa is also a qualified psychodynamic counsellor and audition coach. On the coaching website, *4D Human Being*, Philippa states that she is:

> Passionate about the story we are telling about ourselves to the world – in all four dimensions. What we're feeling, thinking, doing and believing shape us as human beings. And all too often we don't fully communicate to the world who we are in all four dimensions. What story are we telling ourselves inside our heads? And what story are we telling the world? Because that's who we'll be, or rather, who we'll become.
>
> (*4D Human Being*, n.d.)

Like Deborah, Philippa has stopped performing improvisation herself. In reference to accepting anything that happens on stage and saying 'yes' to it she states:

> This goes back to the quality that you don't have any control over and you have to accept that if you want to improvise in that way, that is, to be the best you have to accept those possibilities and that lack of control and the older you get as a woman the more incongruent some of those potential stage happenings are.
>
> (interview transcript)

5.3.13 Patti Stiles

Patti is a very experienced improvisation teacher and improviser. She apprenticed with Keith Johnstone at Loose Moose Theatre in Canada and has worked with Dana Andersen at Rapid Fire Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta (see 5.4.9) as the artistic director. She is now in her native Australia working as the Artistic Director of Impro Melbourne. She taught Deborah Frances-White and Tom Salinsky impro intensively and could be said to be instrumental in keeping Johnstonian impro alive in the UK despite its decline when Johnstone left for Canada (see 5.4.8) through their formation of The Spontaneity Shop. Patti has long been involved with the Improvathon and *Die-Nasty*, Rapid Fire's long running improvised soap (see 5.4.9). From her biography:

> Her interpretation and extension of Johnstone's work and philosophy, combined with her wealth of experience on the world impro stage has made her a "must have" teacher for performers and companies wishing to create spontaneous theatre with fine skill, strong narrative and elegant style.
>
> (Stiles, 2013)

Patti's main aim is to inspire, as a teacher, as a performer and as a person (Stiles, 2013). This follows on from one of Johnstone's techniques for creating good spontaneous stories 'inspire your partner' or find out what your partner enjoys when playing on stage and give them that thing, 'give your partner a good time' (Johnstone, 2007). Patti's online blog has been added to the data set for this research as it is a record of her concerns and thoughts around impro. Since I originally downloaded all of the blog entries the blog has been migrated to this location; http://pattistiles.com/category/impro-blog/.

5.3.14 The Improvathon

The Improvathon is an endurance long-form episodic improvised play. It was developed by Dana Andersen (who originally trained at Del Close's theatre, Second City) in Canada, began in 1993 and runs annually. This version is the award-winning *Die-Nasty* which lasts for fifty-three hours at the Varscona Theatre, Edmonton, annually.

In 2005, Andersen, in partnership with Ken Campbell, brought the format to England where they ran a fifty-hour Improvathon. It has since run annually in theatres in London such

as the Hoxton Hall. Since 2008 it has been run in association with the Sticking Place (Adam Megiddo) with *Pack up Your Troubles* (2009) and *We Are Not Amused* (2010). There is also a Liverpool Improvathon *Oh Wait* (2008) a memorial to Ken Campbell, *The Last Resort* (2010) and *Dearly Beloved* (2011) and the *Bristol 29 Hour Improvathon* (2009) and *The Easyspeak Speakeasy* (2010) at the Bristol Old Vic as part of *Improjam* the Bristol-based festival of improvisation run by Tom Morris, artistic director of the Old Vic. The Improvathon has recently premiered in Australia in 2011.

The Improvathon runs for at least thirty hours and up to seventy-two, with the time span for each separate Improvathon event decided upon in advance. Ideally players commit to staying awake for this time, though there is no compulsion to do so. It is recommended that players avoid drugs and alcohol and only drink tea and coffee at the times they would on any normal day. The idea is to stay awake naturally in order for the sleep deprivation to affect the performance and create a space/time that allows for the players' inner censors to get quiet. The audience can access the performance by buying a weekend pass which allows them to come and go as they please or they can purchase a ticket for a particular episode. Audiences are encouraged to bring sleeping bags and food and stay for the duration. In other words they are encouraged to 'make themselves at home' in opposition to the norms of theatrical consumption. The structure upon which the emerging story is laid is an episode that starts every two hours and ends after an hour and three quarters allowing the players, director and musicians a fifteen minute break to go backstage, rest and eat. Players are encouraged to eat a little snack at each break and avoid sugary food that will mess around with their blood sugar. Players are encouraged (through the advice from more experienced players) to really look after their bodies during the 'ordeal'. After a break the entire group meet and take roll call to see who is cast in the next episode. This way the director can check to see if anyone is deciding to take a break for a sleep and will not be available for the next episode. The entire cast then sing the 'theme' song in a circle together to raise the energy and togetherness before going on again. It is considered important at this point to make eye contact with all fellow performers during this 'circle time'. Then the performers who haven't been called for this episode then join the audience and the players who have been called wait backstage for the 'hot thirties'. The 'hot thirties' are a series of very short presentations of characters direct to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. Each character is called to the stage to deliver a moment, spoken or physical or both that either sums up their character, fills the audience in on what has happened to them so far or continues a running joke that has gone through the whole show or all three. An example of the latter in *The Easyspeak Speakeasy* would be Ruth Bratt's character Alice Capone, where the realities of the character and the actor would slip in and out of focus as she revealed as much about herself as her character during these hot thirties. This defocussing was

very skilful and created a rich theatrical experience through the somewhat ironic meta-commentary that Bratt made about previous characters she has played and the unusually sexy character she was currently playing. Once each character has had the opportunity to do the hot thirties the action begins as the director calls one or more characters to the playing space saying, for example, “Flimsy Premise and Eddie ‘Gotcha’ Oatcakes bump into each other on the busy street outside the Easyspeak Speakeasy”. This light touch direction means that the characters can discover for themselves what the scene will be about as it emerges and they will drive the story on by making and accepting offers. The director and producer will take notes so that they can keep track of the characters’ story arcs and interactions with each other. A call like the example above will also be an open offer for the rest of the cast to populate this busy street and help to make the theatrical-world three dimensional and alive through spontaneity and complicity. The director will also call for musical numbers, Shakespearean scenes, dream sequences, and dances so that the realism of some scenes is balanced with a vast range of performance techniques and theatrical forms. Sometimes the director will call for games and sometimes the improvisers will find the game within the scene for themselves. Traditionally there is also a children’s episode where the players consciously tone down the material and the director calls for lots of game scenes so that an audience of children can also enjoy the show (at a child-friendly time of day). This is also a chance for the improvisers to experience some light relief and a further defocussing of the playing space where the characters can come out of their world and even out of their storyline for a bit and have fun with the form. The episodic structure repeats for fifteen episodes (in the case of the Bristol Improvathon) with characters and plot being killed off and wound up respectively in the final few episodes and the director skilfully moving the cast towards the big payoff at the end in order to fulfil the promises that have been made during the entire story. In the case of Bristol these were; some deaths, a wedding, and the resolution of the leading love triangle (square) with the right pairs of lovers ending up with each other.

This complex storytelling is extemporised and can only happen if the players, the director, the producer, the light and sound operator (in Liverpool this was the director and producer’s function as well) and the musicians (and to some extent the audience) all understand and do the following:

> The maxim for sustaining the work, Campbell says, is "the no". Knowing the breadth of his field of reference, I assume this something to do with Noh theatre, and spell it out to check. "I just spell it n, o," he says. "Dana Andersen says, ʻDonʻt ever say no. Work round it. Do not say the word no ... Saying yes will often bring surprises and will dig you deeper. Yes will make the world open up.ʻ"
>
> (Irvine, 2005)

The idea of this extreme, endurance long-form improvisational state is that, according to Campbell (referring to the fifty-three hour version), by saying 'yes':

> The really interesting point comes about 30 hours in […] "The lizard brain is the key," [Campbell] says, explaining that at this point in the improvathon, the performers gain full access to some of the supposedly primitive but very useful areas of the human mind. "After hour 30, people I hadn't thought were anything in particular became brilliant. Hours 26 to 30 were the most uniformly abysmal, but they were followed by six hours of sensations".
>
> (Irvine, 2005)

According to Adam Megiddo, speaking before the thirty hour Bristol Improvathon, the work would hit a sticky patch around ten hours in at four in the morning and improve from there. He says:

> In the dark hours, around 4 to 5am, I became completely hysterical, and everything anyone said seemed completely hilarious. Then there was a period where I felt I was dying. Going through that was brilliant. It's a very freeing thing to just gloriously die, and not care about it. It was an extremely emotional experience, too," he adds, explaining that spending a day and a half closely engaged with 25 other performers to whom you refused nothing was an unusually intense experience. "I felt I could have gone on for another 12 hours at the end of it."
>
> (Irvine, 2005)

Dylan Emery of Showstopper is quoted as saying:

> No drug lasts long enough to see you through, as you will have a catastrophic comedown – caffeine is a really bad idea. So it's all about lots of slow-burn foods, water and sunlight, when you can grab some. When people step outside around 7am they sort of unfurl like spring flowers.
>
> (Editors blog, 2010)

There is a growing interest in the show from audience and performers. Performers, in particular, are very keen to do an Improvathon. The Improvathon needs a large level of unpaid commitment for a considerable time and the sleep deprivation necessitates a few days recovery afterwards. Yet even professional performers with a mainstream reputation get involved, for example, actor Alan Cox.

5.3 Back to the Origins

The very beginnings of performance improvisation are lost in the beginnings of human culture. Based, as it is, on oral culture it must be that the very first performances were improvised, perhaps in the storytelling traditions. Improvisation almost certainly pre-dates written forms. In fact it must be that there was no distinct category of improvisation prior to written forms of performance. However, for the purposes of this research, the distinction must be made between devised (but unwritten) performance, i.e. performances that have been rehearsed

and performed without extemporisation and performance that is literally made-up on the spot (i.e. improvised performance).

This historical section will begin with a limited exploration of the *Commedia dell'Arte* (there are many detailed histories of this form of theatre) and especially the role of women in the (re)introduction of improvised dialogue onto the *Commedia* stage in the sixteenth century. I will then look at a few examples of attempted revivals of the *Commedia* working method. following this I look briefly at Viola Spolin's application of improvisation that led to the 'Chicago' style of improv in America before approaching Johnstone's work on improvisation and competitive impro formats, and touching on Ken Campbell as the two main approaches extant in the UK impro scene currently. I will then look at the context of the London-based improvisational scene from whence the case studies and interviewees are drawn and see what is happening currently.

5.4.1 *Commedia dell'Arte*

The *Commedia dell'Arte*:

> Was improvised comedy in which stock types were used and masks expressing their prevailing characters were worn. Its players were so highly skilled, well trained and versatile that they were able to make a convincing play from the briefest scenario in which no dialogue was written, and few stage directions were given. It presented a tremendous challenge which was met with joyous élan and overcome with gaiety and gusto, the whole body being used to convey the meaning required.
>
> (Robertson, 1960, 2-3)

In his book on the *Commedia dell'Arte* John Rudlin states; 'if there is to be a regeneration of the theatrical medium in the next century, it must come via the re-empowering of the performer rather than the continued hegemony of playwright and director' (Rudlin, 1994, 1). He is clear from the outset that the development of the Commedia's characters and scenarios came from the actors themselves (Rudlin, 1994, 15), but that the history is elusive and the use and execution of improvisation within the Commedia, whilst certainly extant, is indeterminate because of the nature of oral culture, 'a phenomenon of the folk which became part of their lore before being patronised by the mighty, an organic growth from popular origins which only latterly became a set of cultivated conventions that could be adopted by 'play-writers' (Rudlin, 1994, 2). Initially the *Commedia* grew, in the sixteenth century, beginning in Italy and spreading throughout Europe, from the origins of Carnival (Rudlin, 1994, 8). The term *Commedia dell'Arte*, though contested, is defined by Rudlin as; 'a genus[...] that was professional, masked and initially publicly improvised on temporary outdoor platforms in simple costumes' (1994, 14) this is in contrast to the contemporaneous *Commedia Erudita*, which was scripted,

performed indoors, on stage in the courts by wealthy amateurs in elaborate costumes (1994, 14). This apparent freedom of the *Commedia dell'Arte* was tempered by the need for licenses to perform and the term, *Arte* which implied some kind of unionised professional grouping not unlike the medieval English guilds (Rudlin, 1994, 14). Of the difference between the courtly *Commedia Erudita* and the early *Commedia dell'Arte*, Rudlin states that it was not that 'one was a profession and the other a hobby, or that one was for nobs and the other for plebs, but that one was initially and outdoor form, breathing the fresh air of invention and the other indoor and sustained by artifice' (Rudlin, 1994, 23). Rudlin argues that *Commedia* was born in the middle of the sixteenth century from the market place and the need to work hard to attract an audience and earn a living (Rudlin, 1994, 23). Merchants and other sellers of goods would employ entertainments and performances in order to help sell their goods (Rudlin, 1994, 24-28). The other source from which the *Commedia* formed, as mentioned above, was the Carnival, though Rudlin argues that this is harder to document (Rudlin, 1994, 28). However, he cites Mango and Lombardi:

> When one has said that the *Commedia dell'Arte* is a manifestation which comes from tying dressing up together with improvisation, one has already directly arrived at the ritual nature of several cultural processes whose origin stems from Carnival. In Carnival we find the masks, the language, the triviality, the satire, the mimicry, the acrobatics, in one word all the elements which have passed into the tradition of improvisation.
>
> (in Rudlin, 1994, 31)

This links improvisation and *Commedia* not only to Bakhtin's notions of carnival, but also to Turner's notions of the ritual aspects of theatre.

Rudlin touches upon the traditional battle between carnival and lent that is portrayed in Pieter Breughel's painting *The Battle Between Carnival and Lent* (see fig. 2), figuring as a battle 'between asceticism and artistic licence, censorship and freedom of expression, a tension which is also inborn in *Commedia dell'Arte*' (Rudlin, 1994, 32). It is possible that this tension arises within the current practice of impro and through the analysis of the female experience of impro it is hoped to prove this here. Rudlin argues that the basic building blocks of the improvised *Commedia dell'Arte* arise from this conflict, or contrasti, between 'authority and the underdog, rich and poor, privileged and dispossessed' (Rudlin, 1994, 33) that was expressed and resolved (temporarily) during the time of Carnival. He argues that *Commedia* served a similar purpose of the restoration of social balance (Rudlin, 1994, 33). This simplistic view, of the function of carnival (and indeed comedic performance generally) as a safety valve with no transformative/transgressive potential, is contested by scholars such as Bakhtin. The most distinct difference between the *Commedia dell'Arte* practice and modern improvised comedy is the use of scenarios. In *Commedia* there are set or pre-determined plot outlines

which the masks follow. The dialogue is extemporised (Rudlin, 1994, 53-55). This lends itself to full length plays (although there are long-form improvisation troupes who attempt to extemporise a full length play, as well as the Improvathon). The Johnstonian form of impro is sketch-based, using audience suggestions, set structures and games or even scenes from nothing with which to extemporise from. Characters, dialogue and scenarios are all invented in the moment and the technique of stepping into a scene with nothing pre-planned, opening your mouth and seeing what emerges is central to Johnstone's impro technique. It seems that, for the modern improviser the need to know in advance plot points, snatches of dialogue and stage directions would be too restrictive. The art of improvising in the moment of performance with only one's training and the 'laws' of narrative to go by seems to be an invention of two figures of the twentieth century; Del Close in the US and Keith Johnstone in the UK.

Figure 2: The Battle Between Carnival and Lent by Pieter Breughel , 1559

5.4.2 The Mask in Commedia

The nature of reverting to type (cliché, stereotype) within improvised scenes may have originated in *Commedia* and may be a necessary and intriguing function of improvised comedy. Rudlin refers to the use of the mask in *Commedia* performance as having the effect that 'personality disappeared to be replaced by type' (1994, 34). Rudlin cites Giorgio Strehler:

> The mask is a terrible, mysterious instrument. It has always given me and continues to give me a feeling of fear. With the mask we are on the threshold of a

> theatrical mystery whose demons reappear with static, immutable faces, which are at the very roots of theatre.
>
> (Rudlin, 1994, 34)

This threshold position of the mask accords with Turner's notions of liminality and performance. Rudlin reports that at the time of carnival, a masked man was not allowed to bear arms as he was considered to have assumed another persona for whose actions he could not be held accountable - such is the 'danger' of the mask. Keith Johnstone writes about the mask in improvised performance and this masked state seems to hold clues as to the powerful, liminal transformative potential of improvised comedy performance. Rudlin charts the etymology of mask and sees that it cannot only refer to the object of a mask and the effects thereof, but also to the adoption of a persona as opposed to a personality. Persona being 'of all times and all places' (Rudlin, 1994, 34) as distinct from personality 'which is time and place specific' (Rudlin, 1994, 34). This can explain why, when improvising characters in performance, players tend to revert to certain types that could perhaps accord with the stock characters within *Commedia* - it is a mode of tapping archetypes that could appear as cliché and, therefore, not subversive. As Rudlin says of *Commedia* 'there is no point [...] in looking for values [...] which it cannot provide, such as psychological realism' (Rudlin, 1994, 34). In fact, as Rudlin states, 'laughter is dependent on stereotyping, on objects of derision being less than human and objects of amazement more so' (Rudlin, 1994, 35). Rudlin states, on working with masks:

> As an actor you must work within the limitations of persona and cannot escape into the complexities of personality. In a sense you are the prisoner of the mask, and you must play your part in terms of the statement it makes, rather than in terms of some complex of emotions that go beyond that statement. Actors must 'live up' to the mask.
>
> (Rudlin, 1994, 35)

This accords with Johnstone's approach to mask work which is outside the remit of this research but is fascinating in its own right. Rudlin goes on to say:

> Each mask represents a moment in everyone's (rather than someone's) life. That is not to say that the fixed types of *Commedia* are simplistic or reductive of life: each contains and expresses at least one paradox and its seemingly obvious physicality usually implies a metaphysical quality, which it may take and actor years to acquire.
>
> (Rudlin, 1994, 35)

Citing Braun on Meyerhold[17], Rudlin argues that the mask is a transformative aspect of the theatre, aiding the spectator in flying 'away to the land of make-believe' (Rudlin, 1994, 36) and seeing the aspect of the mask within themselves and others. Perhaps the mask's purpose (whether the physical mask or the persona of simplistic, archetypal characters in comedy improvisation) is to enable the performer and spectator to develop consciousness of the simplistic, base emotions that drive action.

Rudlin also cites theatre director, Jacques Copeau, on the neutrality, or effacement of the actor's ego and personality needed to play with masks:

> The actor who plays in a mask receives the reality of his character from a cardboard object. He is commanded by it and must obey it willy-nilly. No sooner has he put it on than he feels an unknown being spread into his veins of whose existence he had no suspicion. It is not only his face that is modified, it is his entire being, the very nature of his reflexes where feelings are already performing themselves that he was equally incapable of feeling or feigning when bare-faced...even the tone of his voice will be dictated by his mask.
>
> (Rudlin, 1994, 36)

Rudlin's account of *Commedia* is monologic and celebratory, this univocal approach is troubled by Tim Fitzpatrick who argues that theorists and historians can have little understanding of the ephemeral nature of the Commedia. He states:

> Few [...] will have had any real experience in the particular theatre process known to be involved in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Worse they may have done 'improvisation' classes or workshops at some point in their careers, and bring non-pertinent notions of post-Stanislavsky improvisation to *Commedia dell'Arte*.
>
> (Fitzpatrick, 1995, 3)

Fitzpatrick's dismissal of contemporary improvisation practice as solely Stanislavskian in form[18] demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the breadth of improvisatory practice and an academic colonisation of the term 'improvisation'. However, Fitzpatrick does redefine *Commedia* as:

> A theatrical hybrid shot through with internal tensions on various axes, both synchronic and diachronic [...] It lasted over two centuries, had numerous local varieties and variants, was constantly in flux as new practitioners worked on it and new social, cultural and theatrical situations impinged upon it. It was a hybrid of

---

[17] All the citations from Rudlin are quoted from Rudlin rather than going to the original, despite the importance of these sources, because the originals are either in French or Italian, as I speak neither language to the extent of being able to accurately translate text, Rudlin's translations will have to suffice.

[18] Stanislavsky used improvisation as a rehearsal tool in order for actors to develop a written character into a more rounded and three-dimensional being, he never *performed* improvisation, Merlin, 2007; Stanislavsky, 1980.

> high and low culture, of comic and pathetic, of gestural and oratorical, of literate and oral memory and performance process.
>
> (Fitzpatrick, 1995, 3)

One of these impingements upon the development of *Commedia* concerns the involvement of women and is, according to scholar and historian Kathleen McGill, central to the adoption of improvised practices in the *Commedia* form.

5.4.3 Women in Commedia

McGill states:

> The development of repertory improvisation in the theater occurred simultaneously with the appearance of women performers on the stage, as it was in the *Commedia* troupes of the sixteenth century that women first went beyond the occasional activities of singing or dancing and assumed interpretative roles.
>
> (McGill, 1991, 59)

This, she argues, was because 'women's culture was overwhelmingly oral' (McGill, 1991, 59). The particular social condition that brought women onto the *Commedia* stage in the first place, however, illustrates the type of female transgressor that was doing the improvisation. McGill claims that it was possible that the women who came onto the *Commedia* stage where courtesans whose income source from prostitution was hampered by a new morality post-1560 which saw legal limitations placed upon all kinds of amusements (McGill, 1991, 62-3). The courtesans' experience in entertaining men and their greater financial and personal autonomy and, therefore, greater access to education than most women of the time, meant that:

> One alternative perhaps was to earn a living by using the ability to perform, and particularly to perform improvisatory comedy, and entertainment most frustrating to the censors because of its lack of a reliably fixed text.
>
> (McGill, 1991, 63)

In McGill's account evidence is drawn from the reports of contemporary audiences as to the improvisatory abilities of these female performers. They were praised for 'their transformative versatility, by which they were able to play not only more than one genre but also more than one part; and second their ability to compose freely' (McGill, 1991, 64). These women 'appeared to spectators as poets in action, professionals in the art of improvising words' (McGill, 1991, 64).

McGill's exploration of these original texts has led her to believe that 'it was the women performers who introduced, developed and excelled at the practice of comic repertory improvisation' (McGill, 1991, 65) and that prior to their involvement the evidence is that

Commedia consisted of simple buffooneries (McGill, 1991, 65). The combination of these buffooneries, characterised by Italian critic Fernando Taviani as "masculine farce", and what he termed "feminine culture [...] that characteristic most symbolic of the *Commedia dell'Arte* – improvisation"' (in McGill, 1991, 65) formed an alliance between these two worlds and thus the inherent nature of the *Commedia* was a merger of masculine and feminine attributes according to Taviani (in McGill, 1991, 65). The orality of female culture at this point in history served to introduce onto the *Commedia* stage improvisation as a central method for playing scenarios and also a collaborative preference. McGill concludes that:

> In choosing a repertory model these early women performers acted not by default, but by an expressed preference for socially collaborative forms. The revolutionary strength of this preference was that it included the ability to develop a methodology by which such a group could not only integrate itself but also successfully entertain a variety of audiences, in a variety of circumstances, with the least possible effort [...] the choice of a highly collaborative methodology made competition resolutely nonproducticve; alert cooperation is the key to improvisation because any extended focus on one part breaks, as Perucci described it, the thread of the intrigue. This social diversity and collaborative methodology refused to enact difference in oppositional terms; instead, difference became multiple, inclusive and highly adaptive.
>
> (McGill, 1991, 68-9)

This conclusion accords with the Johnstonian methodology of impro and so it can be argued that the modern improvisatory techniques that have their roots in *Commedia* also have their roots in female oral and collaborative culture. McGill ends by connecting these early women in the arts to their modern day counterparts when she states:

> What many women in the arts desire is not the passive-active poles of the oppositional model but an alternative definition of the process entirely, one which chooses a field rather than a chain of being and conversation in preference to dialectic.
>
> (McGill, 1991, 69)

5.4.4 *Commedia* Revivals – Searching For a New Improvisatory Theatre

Jacques Copeau, a theatre practitioner working at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe, sought to revisit the improvisatory techniques of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Rudlin states 'Copeau was immediately aware that the re-empowering of the actor would entail the disempowering of the director' (Rudlin, 1994, 177). He cites Copeau:

> Introduction of the characters in the new comedy by their ancestors from the Italian comedy and the French farce. They evict from the theatre: the poet who comes offering his written play, the pretentious actor, the prompter from his box, etc. Finally the director appears, looking sad, constantly searching for a good literary play... They tear off his wig and his beard... rid him of his director's clothes and he appears in the costume of a jester. And the improvisation begins.

(Copeau in Rudlin, 1994, 177-8)

Copeau was partly inspired by the experiments in 1846-8 of George and Maurice Sand at the theatre in Nohant, France where a group of bored dinner party guests began to play charades. This playfulness developed into an 'extempore method [which] formed the accidental basis of their later discoveries, as from the outset they instinctively eschewed written texts for their scenes' (Rudlin, 1994, 5). This amateur pastime would have stayed just that had they not written analyses of their activities, for example Rudlin cites Maurice Sand:

> We naturally began to discuss the origins of theatre; none of us had studied them, some were still children with no notions, however vague, of the history of this art form. We asked ourselves what theatre really was, and if the convention of written dialogue had not destroyed rather than enhanced it.
>
> (in Rudlin, 1994, 5)

In their amateur theatre and academy they explored Greek, Roman and medieval popular forms and 'finally came to one which seemed to them to be the most extraordinary and fascinating, the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*' (Rudlin, 1994, 5) and for two years reconstructed the form in their small theatre at Nohant. On improvisation and the need for structure Sand states:

> The strange thing is that, when you begin to improvise, far from having nothing to say, you find yourself overflowing with dialogue and make scenes too long as a result. The hidden danger in this genre is to sacrifice the development of the basic idea to incidents which stem from it. You must also be very alert, in order not to have several characters speaking at the same time, to the possibility of having to sacrifice what you were going to say as a result of something your partner has said, and also to revitalise the action when you sense him flagging; to bring the scene back to its objective when the others are wandering off the point and to stick to it yourself when your imagination is trying to persuade you to go off to dream-land. In spite of our good intentions, it happened more than once that the voice of those actors who had left the stage and become spectators would bring us to order, shouting 'get back to the scenario'.
>
> (in Rudlin, 1994, 59)

The form and the structure are what enable the actor to find spontaneous free-reign for the content. Without the structure and certain 'rules' the content would be unsatisfying and unintelligible. Good-natured complicity forms the foundational bedrock of the improvisation method as they seem to have discovered for themselves at Nohant.

Later, Copeau sought not to reconstruct the *Commedia dell'Arte* as it had been, but to evolve a new improvised comedy that was as contemporaneously relevant as the *Commedia* was in its time (Rudlin, 1994, 178). He was inspired by the early twentieth century writings of Edward Gordon Craig whose idea for a school for acting, that was halted by the outbreak of war and never came to fruition, was to be founded on a training towards improvised

performance (Rudlin, 1994, 163-166). Craig's intention was to 'open wide the larger doors of the future to the actor so that he may with self-reliance know that all parts are ready for the comedian who cares to undergo the training which gives the power to improvise' (cited in Rudlin, 1994, 164). Craig knew that this would take no small amount of training as 'no-one believes improvisation to be the invention of the last minute' (cited in Rudlin, 1994, 164). His curriculum would take three years and cover:

> (1) The principles of movement of the human body
> (2) Within two years I will give you and demonstrate to you the principles of movement on the scene of single figures and of massed groups of figures
> (3) And within three years I will give you the whole principle governing action scene and voice
> (4) After that I will give you the principles of improvisation or spontaneous acting with and without words.
>
> (cited in Rudlin, 1994, 164-5)

Ultimately the use of improvisation for Copeau's work evaded him and it perhaps could be said that his method of actor-created characters became a pre- and post- first world war precursor to devised theatre making (Rudlin, 1994, 180-184) rather than impro.

5.4.5 Improvising, Lydia Thompson and the Origins of Burlesque

Burlesque dancing has an ignominious image epitomised by striptease and associated with seedy entertainment for the pleasure of men, placing the woman firmly as object of desire. But its history is more complex than this, and it could be argued that this reductionist view of burlesque demonstrates the assimilation and insertion into the capitalist phallic paradigm of what was originally (and potentially) a subversive and resistant mode of female performance practice. Burlesque means 'to make a mockery of' and the term originated in the bawdy comedies of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*. I see burlesque (especially the neo-burlesque form that is usually a three to four minute choreography to a popular song) as a 'dance joke' especially when there is a mocking or parodic theme, one that usually mocks some aspect of fixed gender. Modern Burlesque can be traced back to Lydia Thompson's *British Blondes*. It was the Blondes' unplanned social commentary, or improvisation, that was particularly threatening to the status quo and perhaps gave the "leg business" its subversive power as, more threatening than the unruliness of bursting at the seams and the spilling out of fleshy bust and bum, is the spilling of secrets and the spontaneous utterances of the unruly performing woman. Willson says 'burlesque's anarchic and nonsensical concoction of forms and its figurehead sexualised, witty female performer had clear political intent. It fulfilled a necessary transgressive function, which was to undermine hierarchy in terms of authority, gender, form, skill, theatrical distance, social decorum and class' (Willson, 2008, 18). Sexual allure and witty/critical intelligence – in a

woman! Its no wonder that men (and women) were unsettled, this upset the 'natural' social order. Burlesque performers, with their origins in Lydia Thompson's 'horrible prettiness' (Allen, 1981), like to cause scenes and make spectacles of themselves, for as Willson states, 'burlesque, it seems, takes off at particularly tense and potentially eruptive pressure points in history when hierarchy, borders and boundaries oscillate and reshuffle' (Willson, 2008, 20). Perhaps this is why, for the most part of the twentieth century burlesque has been relegated to the removal of clothes and display of the female form until a few intrepid male and female performers began to experiment anew with burlesque as an unruly performance form in the neo-burlesque revival which has again been reduced to mere spectacle save for a few resilient performers such as Cha Cha Boom Boom, a UK-based performance artist working in the burlesque context.

5.4.6 Viola Spolin and the Development of Improv in the United States

Viola Spolin's childhood was, in a similar way to Nohant, characterised by spontaneous operas performed by her family members that helped them to come to terms, through comedy and buffoonery, with their immigrant status in America (Spolin, 1973, vii). This spontaneity and game playing became the basis for her theatre training 'as a means to free the child and the so-called amateur from mechanical, stilted stage behaviour' (Spolin, 1973, vii). Gradually this developed into an experimental theatre that used audience suggestions to play improvised scenes. Spolin's son Paul Sills developed the spontaneous scene playing form first with The Compass Players (1956-9) and then at Second City Theatre (1959 – current) in Chicago and Spolin published *Improvisation for the Theatre* in 1963, a seminal guide to improvised performance based on her assertion that everyone can act and everyone can improvise (Spolin, 1973, 3). Spolin aligns improvisation with spontaneity and intuition and argues that capacity for these skills is not taught, but developed through experiencing (Spolin, 1973, 3-4). "Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other peoples findings" (Spolin, 1973, 4). This is an idealistic notion of freedom that is often erroneously applied to the act of improvising despite failing to account for notions of an identity formed through cultural sedimentation (Butler, 1990), power and dominance, internal policing or panopticon (Foucault, 1980) that cannot easily be left behind during the act of improvisation. However, Spolin goes on to say that 'it is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression' (Spolin, 1973, 4) and it is perhaps what is revealed through the exaggerations and stereotypes that emerge in improvised comedy that reveals something about the nature of identity formation and its relationship to culture and power relations. Spolin identifies seven aspects that help to nurture spontaneity.

Games; Spolin's improvisation is, like Johnstone's, based on the playing of games and it appears that she has some inkling of the balance between order and chaos that characterises improvisation when she says, 'it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game's objective in any style he chooses. As long as he abides by the rules of the game' (Spolin, 1973, 5). Spolin sees that the rules of the game enable a release of spontaneity within their boundaries (Spolin, 1973, 6).

Approval/Disapproval; Spolin states, 'in a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated' (Spolin, 1973, 7). This is quite a political statement, it associates itself with the Socratic notion of the unexamined life not being worth living in the context of her assertion that the first step towards playing is feeling personal freedom and that self-knowledge is a necessity for theatrical expression (Spolin, 1973, 5). Spolin places the locus of the authority of approval/disapproval with social structures and argues that this prevents us from being spontaneous by policing our notions of 'good' and 'bad' directed internally (Spolin, 1973, 7-8). She says 'with an awakening sense of self, authoritarianism drops away' (Spolin, 1973, 9) and then there is no need for the notions of approval/disapproval.

Group Expression; 'Improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing that material evolves for scenes' (Spolin, 1973, 9-10). It is this notion of complicity and emergence, with no dominating character or force that characterises liminal ludic communitas, or 'playing together at the threshold'.

Audience; Spolin positions the audience as the most important element of the theatre she says, 'they make the performance meaningful' (Spolin, 1973, 13). 'When the audience is understood to be an organic part of the theater experience, the student-actor is immediately given a host's sense of responsibility towards them which has in it no nervous tension. The fourth wall disappears, and the lonely looker-in becomes part of the game, part of the experience' (Spolin, 1973, 13). In my experience, being fearless on stage when improvising reassures and comforts the audience. Nervous improvisers worry the audience and prevent them from having a good time.

Theatre Techniques; Spolin is clear that techniques and methods need to be flexible and able to adjust to the needs of time and place and so does not decree a particular fixed form (Spolin, 1973, 14). The modern fixed form of *Commedia Dell'Arte* is an example of how technique has overridden content and experiencing to the extent that the form looks outdated. According to Spolin techniques should not be separated from direct experiencing (Spolin, 1973,

14). Her notion is that if 'experiencing and techniques are spontaneously wedded [this frees] the student for the flowing, endless pattern of stage behaviour' (Spolin, 1973, 14) and she asserts that theatre games achieve this (Spolin, 1973, 14).

Carrying The Learning Process Into Daily Life; here Spolin is highlighting the porous nature of training with a phenomenological approach to embodying theatre training results and carrying them into daily living, 'the world provides the material for the theater, and artistic growth develops hand in hand with one's recognition of it and himself within it' (Spolin, 1973, 15).

Physicalization; finally Spolin links notion of the experiential approach to the body, saying 'the physical is the known, and through it we may find our way to the unknown, the intuitive, and perhaps beyond to man's spirit itself' (Spolin, 1973, 16). 'For improvisational theatre, for instance, where few or no props, costumes, or set pieces are used, the player learns that a stage reality must have space, texture, depth, and substance – in short, physical reality' (Spolin, 1973, 17).

Spolin's seven aspects of spontaneity were developed in the US at around same time as Keith Johnstone was developing his own approach to spontaneity and impro in the UK though they were unaware of each other (Johnstone, 1989, 27). Many of the same principles can be found in both schools of thought and the desire to see spontaneous, vital theatre is common to both Johnstone and Spolin. Spolin's legacy was taken up by Del Close and Charna Halpern in the United States where a slightly different impro tradition was developed (usually called improv). This tradition trained some very famous and influential Hollywood actors such as Mike Myers, Steve Carrell and Paul Rudd. The epitome of this tradition is seen in the heavily improvised Hollywood comedies directed by Judd Apatow that are currently enjoying critical and audience acclaim. It is beyond the remit of this research to go into more detail on this strand of improvisation.

5.4.8 Keith Johnstone at the Royal Court

Johnstone's book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* was first published in 1979. Irving Wardle's introduction includes the line 'he struck me then as a revolutionary idealist looking for a guillotine. He saw corruption everywhere' (Wardle, 1989, 9). Johnstone worked at the Royal Court Theatre in the late 1950s and taught improvisation at the Actor's Studio there. He 'started to teach his own particular style of improvisation, much of it based on fairy stories, word associations, intuitive responses, and later he taught mask work as well. All his work has been to encourage the rediscovery of the imaginative response in the adult; the re-finding of

the power of the child's creativity' (Wardle, 1989, 9). Wardle defines the Johnstonian approach:

> You are not imaginatively impotent until you are dead; you are only frozen up. Switch off the no-saying intellect and welcome the unconscious as a friend: it will lead you to places you never dreamed of, and produce results more 'original' than anything you could achieve by aiming at originality.
>
> (Wardle, 1989, 10)

The first few pages of Johnstone's seminal first book consist of a series of anecdotes detailing his experiences on the 'threshold'. This notion of liminality as being the realm of spontaneity is the foundation of the Johnstonian approach to theatre, performance, impro and extending into life. He also celebrates embodied, subjugated knowledge, for example, in describing his experience of first watching Alexander Dovzhenko's film Earth (1930) concerning an insurrection by a community of farmers following a hostile takeover by landowners. Johnstone writes:

> In one moment I knew that the valuing of men by their intelligence is crazy, that the peasants watching the night sky might feel more than I feel, that the man who dances might be superior to myself – word-bound and unable to dance. From then on I noticed how warped many people of great intelligence are, and I began to value people for their actions, rather than their thoughts.
>
> (Johnstone, 1989, 18)

This statement aligns with the notion of subjugated knowledge and questions the locus of power, language and knowledge in a Foucauldian manner.

In the 1960s, at the Royal Court Theatre, in collaboration with directors George Devine and William Gaskill, Johnstone started a writer's discussion group with the stipulation that nothing was discussed that could not be acted out. 'The group immediately began to function as an improvisation group. We learned that things invented on the spur of the moment could be as good or better than the texts we laboured over' (Johnstone, 1989, 26). The Royal Court Theatre's lineage can be traced back to Jacques Copeau (see above) through his nephew Michel Saint-Denis who took over Copeau's acting company Les Copiaus and developed the *Commedia* inspired actor-led rather than writer-led character creation and performance:

> From the feel of the clothes on my body, from my observation of the politician and the porter and from the mask came my inspiration. With the last minute addition of a hat, I had equipped my character from head to foot.
>
> (Saint-Denis in Rudlin, 1994, 183)

Saint-Denis describes how slow the birth of a mask character can be and that they can only mumble to begin with 'since the character was not fully articulated, how could his speech be' (Rudlin, 1994, 183). Saint Denis then taught Devine who in turn influenced and mentored Johnstone at the Royal Court in the 1950s. This notion of masked character creation and

development has continued in Johnstone's work and is now being taught by Johnstone himself and Loose Moose alumni, Dennis Cahill and Steve Jarand, around the world.

Out of this genealogy was born the Royal Court Theatre Studio where Johnstone taught actors and developed his method of impro. The classes became hysterically funny and Johnstone wondered how they would fare in front of an audience. This experiment became The Theatre Machine and the only pure impro group of the time (Johnstone, 1989, 27). And thus improvised comedy performance was born in the UK albeit, due to the censorship of the time, as lecture-demonstrations to begin with.

Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, in their book *Improvisation in Drama* (1990) discuss the pre-1968 situation regarding the Lord Chamberlain, censorship of the theatre and the 1843 Theatres Act. This climate of censorship prevented any extemporising or improvising on stage, in fact Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop were successfully prosecuted and fined under the act in 1958 for adding a scene to *You Won't Always Be On Top* that had not garnered prior approval. Frost and Yarrow characterise impro as subversive; 'the act of improvisation was seen by many as subversive in itself and allied to subversive politics' (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, 148). They go on to define improvisation as 'a challenge to the dominant cultural assumption [...] the adoption of impro as a method of play creation becomes a political act in itself. It de-emphasises the individual writer, and privileges the creative ensemble – the workshop, with all its connotations of crafts and working class skills' (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, 148). Thus they align the use of improvisation as a devising tool with a Marxist ideology of collective production and while the subversion has perhaps gone from this now widespread mode of theatre creation and you are most likely to find a named author for work produced in this way today, there may still be scope for subversion in directly performed improvisation. During the sixties, in the climate of political upheaval and the still censorious authority of the Lord Chamberlain, Johnstone began to deliver public performances of impro (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, 149 and Johnstone, 1999, 2). Frost and Yarrow state; 'Johnstone's Clowning show for the Royal Court Studio had to be presented officially as a lecture-demonstration. It could not be a play, because it was improvised and [...] that contravened official notions of what a play might be, as well as what it might be about' (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, 149). They note that improvised performance was, therefore, forced to remain an academic exercise (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, 150) unless it was shown in a private club which gave it the same status as strip-tease acts (it is interesting to note that a similar fate is being faced by the burlesque artist today). Johnstone's willingness to commit himself to 'a vision of a theatre based on improvisation was a remarkable act of faith' (Frost and Yarrow, 1990, 150). During this time of teaching and performing, Johnstone developed some basic underlying principles of impro and a series of games through which to

teach these principles to the students. The principles are: Status, Spontaneity, Narrative Skills and Trance Mask.

Status transactions, Johnstone found were the key to finding realistic dialogue and relationships on stage. He began to notice that status and the relationship between high and low status (status transactions) were how people really functioned and an understanding of status can not only improve improvisation but also social interaction in the real world (Johnstone, 1989, 33). Johnstone identifies three status possibilities; low-status player, high status player and the status expert (someone who can raise or lower their status to suit the situation) (Johnstone, 1989, 33-4). Improvisation games like 'status switch' where the characters exchange status during the scene are used by Johnstone to train people to do this and master-servant scenes have huge potential for farcical status switches and transactions. Johnstone aligns spontaneity with madness and asserts that sanity is a front that we all wear to hide our madness. He says; 'we all know instinctively what 'mad' thought is: mad thoughts are those which other people find unacceptable, and train us not to talk about, but which we go to the theatre to see expressed' (Johnstone, 1989, 84-5). Thus Johnstone sees the theatre's potentiality for world-upside-down and carnivalesque.

5.4.9 Keith Johnstone in Canada and Theatresports

> Theatresports was inspired by pro-wrestling [...] wrestling was the only form of working-class theatre I had seen, and the exaltation among the spectators was something I longed for, but didn't get, from 'straight theatre' [...] we fantasised about replacing the wrestlers with improvisers, an 'impossible dream' since every word and gesture on a public stage had to be okayed with the Lord Chamberlain.
>
> (Johnstone, 1999, 1)

Under this pall of censorship Johnstone left England to take up a teaching position at Calgary University in Canada. Here he had the freedom to open the Loose Moose Theatre with public funding support and he trained a whole generation of improvisers whilst also developing the competitive formats he was dreaming of in England for presenting impro to audiences. Here he found the raucous responses and passionate audience for the theatre that he went in search of after seeing the wrestling all those years ago. This reaction was in response to *Theatresports*, where teams are pitched against one another and the highest scoring team wins the match. Scores are determined by judges who grant each scene played a score between one and five. The audience gets behind their team and throws good hearted vitriol at the judges who score their team too low. Audiences also loved *Micetro*, an elimination format where fifteen improvisers fight to be the last one standing who is then crowned the winner, and *Gorilla Theatre* where improvisers are scored for their ability to set up and direct scenes; the player with the most bananas at the end of the game wins. Where it was hard in England to develop impro as a form of theatre in its own right, Canada was the perfect fertile ground for it and the

team based game formats were licensed and spread to the US and Australia (this is the format that Deborah Frances-White encountered in her native country, Australia, and found sadly absent on her arrival in the UK).

As part of my experience and practice of impro I encountered what can be likened to a ritual initiation process in Keith Johnstone's *Micetro* format. The *Micetro* is a vehicle for short-form improvisation invented and developed by Keith Johnstone. Johnstone recognised that short-form improvisation needed presenting in ways that engaged the audience with an over-arching narrative. So while short-form scenes can be engaging in themselves, an evening's improvised entertainment, Johnstone felt, needed a way of engaging the audience such as a competitive element. Almost all of Johnstone's formats, *Theatresports, Gorilla Theatre* and *Micetro* have competitive game structures. The other format *Lifegame* still has a game structure but it does not pitch teams or individuals against each other. It is important to emphasize that the competitiveness of Johnstone's formats is an illusion, or technique used to engage the audience and whilst there will be a real winner, 'having fun is more important than winning' (Johnstone, 1999, 54). Johnstone's assertion is that audiences want to see good-naturedness on stage and that the quality of the work would suffer if the competitors take the competition seriously (Johnstone, 1999). In my experience it is consistently hard for many improvisers to understand this illusion of competition, so ingrained are both winning and individuation in modern society.

As part of The Spontaneity Shop's Level Two programme participants are invited to take part in a *Micetro* show as a culmination to the eight week course. On completion of two eight weeks courses and two *Micetro* performances talented improvisers may be invited to join the semi-professional Level Three course. This is a coveted goal for many participants and so there is definitely an element of the *Micetro* being a rite of passage for the "initiands". This is further enhanced by the ritualised nature of the *Micetro* format. To begin with participants, after a group warm-up, are secreted backstage to wait for the audience to enter and for a master of ceremonies to introduce the format and explain how the evening works. Participants are stripped of their names (although they do introduce themselves at the top of the show), given bibs with numbers on them and referred to as that number for the duration. Turner states 'in mid-transition the initiands are pushed as far towards uniformity, structural invisibility, and anonymity as possible' (Turner, 1986, 26). The show is directed by two much more experienced improvisers (usually the teachers) who pick numbers out of a hat in order to choose which improvisers will be in the next scene. They then set up the scene often with an audience suggestion. The improvisers play the scene and then the audience is asked to show by way of applause what score that particular scene was worth. Individual scores are added up

and after each round, where all the improvisers have been in one scene each, those improvisers with the lowest scores are removed from the process until one winner is declared. In subjecting themselves to the ritualised aspects of the *Micetro* structure, participants are granted a 'special kind of freedom' (Turner, 1986, 26), in this case the freedom to improvise characters, narrative and dialogue. Often it is not the most talented improvisers who end up winning or in the last three surviving improvisers due to the vagaries of the scoring system so the raise in status output associated with the liminal ritual in tribal cultures does not play out in the (narrative) outcome of the *Micetro* performance but those deemed talented enough will be invited up to level three at a time after the space-time of the performance so there is a sense of successful initiation resulting in a status change. Being invited "up" is literal as the level three workshop happens in a room upstairs to the level two so as well as the literal threshold of back to front stage that occurs in the *Micetro* itself there is also a 'passage from one social status to another [that] is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space' (Turner, 1986, 25) as a literal outcome for successful initiands.

5.4.10 UK Impro Now – Ken Campbell and the Improvathon

Thanks in part to Frances-White and her husband, Tom Salinsky, as well as many others, impro in the UK today has some validity as a theatrical form. There is the occasional TV show based on it such as *Whose Line is it Anyway* and *Fast and Loose* (which Ruth Bratt and Pippa Evans have both appeared in). Impro also has its place in comedy panel shows and recently *Impractical Jokers* where improvisers are instructed by their fellow players to act in a certain way whilst interacting with an unsuspecting public. There are regular improvised shows on at theatres, especially in London but there are regional examples too. In particular the work of Adam Megiddo and Dylan Emery is becoming more recognised as Showstopper and the Improvathon become successful and recognised by critics and at festivals such as Edinburgh and Udderbelly on the South Bank in London and the Bristol Jam. The introduction of the Improvathon by Ken Campbell, via Canada's Dana Andersen, married three great interests of Campbell's; improvisation and ultra-long performances that push the actors to the limits of their endurance and the resulting uncensoring, lizard brain state that the combination leads to. Campbell was ultimately interested in shockingly honest theatrical performances that pushed the boundaries of bourgeois sensibilities and dabbled with the grotesque (Coveney, 2011). Campbell saw himself as marginal, on the edges of the British theatre mainstream (Coveney, 2011, 233) and he ran 'eccentric acting classes' (Coveney, 2011, 240) that were attended by Adam Meggido and others from The Sticking Place (production company behind the Improvathon). Towards the end of Campbell's life (he died in 2008) this interest in impro manifested as lots of experimentation with some fine improvising actors and improvising forms; 'there was something in all this that was tapping new sources of energy in acting that

had been submerged in years of "correct" performances in the anodyne repertory theatres and the control areas of the RSC and the National' (Coveney, 2011, 241). Here Campbell's biographer is clearly placing impro outside and almost in opposition to the mainstream theatre.

Campbell had seen Dana Andersen's Die-Nasty in Edmonton, Alberta and was impressed by the improvised soap opera as a theatrical form. Campbell asked actor Sean McCann to go to Canada and experience this. He:

> Ended up playing a grumpy chef and Mick Jagger for fifty hours with four hours off in the middle, which he spent asleep on a sofa."It was the most glorious thing I have ever done," he says. Ken decided that he had to do one of these sagas himself, though he didn't like the word "improvisation" and for a time he used "extemporisation" before settling on "hard bardics", or "opening the bardic tap". "This meant," explains Adam Meggido, "tapping into the other", in whichever form it took, whether it was glossolalia, channelling flights of lyricism, touching the muse, or glimpsing the gods... It could be musical, verbal, physical. He was the goader and we were the rhapsodes.
>
> (Coveney, 2011, 243)

Rhapsodes refers to the ancient Greek professional performers of epic poems and comes from the Greek meaning 'to sew together'. These performers utilised extemporisation in their performances.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter I have given biographical details for myself, focused on my experience as a performer and improviser and also my experience of communitas in a spiritual context: that of Subud and its spontaneous meditative practice, the latihan. I have also given biographical and contextual information for all of the interviewees and I have diagrammatically portrayed our interconnectedness. I have charted the development of impro through *Commedia dell'Arte* and the introduction of extemporised performance through the introduction of women onto the *Commedia* stage due to their illiteracy. I have also located impro in the performances of the earliest burlesque performers, thereby also locating impro as a feminised performance form. I have shown that *Commedia* and also impro were revived in the domestic 'parlour' theatre setting of Nohant and later developed by Copeau into a training for performance. I have explained how Viola Spolin's similarly domestic setting development of impro as a child sowed a seed for the development of a particular American context of improv which is not part of this research but nonetheless needs highlighting. Following this I have gone on to chart Keith Johnstone's virtually simultaneous development of impro in the UK whilst at the Royal Court Theatre and his desire for theatre to be more exciting than it was at the time of heavily censored performances. I have discussed his move to Canada and subsequent development of

competitive impro formats and then I have gone on to discuss the importing of the Improvathon from Canada by Ken Campbell, Patti Stiles connection to Dana Andersen's Edmonton-based Die Nasty being the glue that connects Johnstone indirectly to the development of the Improvathon. In the following chapter I will report on the data collected and analysed from the interviewees.

Chapter Six Data Analysis Report

6.1 Introduction

I have undertaken qualitative research using a methodology of action research, phenomenology and grounded theory. I have deployed strategies for data collection and analysis of self-ethnography and journalling, unstructured/semi-structured interviews and coding and memoing of the collected data. From this data set – of interviews, self-interview, journal entries, "He Said, She Said" – a chapter from *Something Like a Drug* (Foreman and Martini, 1995) and Patti Stiles' online blog – four overarching and common themes have emerged. Firstly, the players make some commentary about impro's outsider relationship to 'legitimate' theatre and the idea of hegemonies within the larger context of impro as well as impro's relation to the hegemony and hegemonic theatre. They make some statements that lend strength to the idea that the act of improvising, especially the Improvathon, is done in a marginal time and space. Secondly, the women discuss their experience as women in impro and experiences of being marginalised. Thirdly, the data details the playful nature of improvising and pitfalls and tendencies that can remove the playfulness. Finally, there is discussion of the communal/communion aspects of participating in impro and especially this comes out in the experience of the Improvathon. These themes are presented as: marginality, marginality of women in impro, playfulness and communality. What follows will be an unpacking of these themes with reference directly to the voices that raised them. These themes will then be assessed against the literature on Liminal Ludic Communitas and women as 'other'. All quotes will be taken from the interview transcripts unless stated otherwise.

6.2 Marginality

All interviewees and blog author, Patti, speak of impro as 'other' than hegemonic theatre, hegemonic television and the hegemonic economy. This has not come up in the self-interview – possibly because I have never been involved professionally with these mainstream contexts. In the chapter on women in impro the marginality or 'otherness' of women in impro dominates as a theme. As can be seen from the biographies of the players almost all have had theatre training, worked in theatre or television, had stand-up comedy careers and are well placed to comment. Of her path into impro, Ruth says 'I just wanted to do anything other than what I had been doing because I was bored out of my skull being an actor because there wasn't any work'. Further to this she states that in the mainstream acting context there are 'four hundred thousand twenty something year old actresses and any one of them could do the part'. Lucy highlights the fact that on her drama degree improvisation was used as a devising tool 'but not really impro in the sense of like Theatresports or long form' thereby highlighting the rarified

nature of the particular context of impro that is being examined here. When Lucy applied for Arts Council funding to visit Canada to participate in an Improvathon and bring the idea back to the UK there was a lack of understanding from the Arts Council who said they 'wanted more avant-garde projects! And I was like what's more avant-garde than that?'. Pippa adds 'what's more avant-garde than staying awake for fifty hours' and performing a soap-opera?'. These comments indicate a lack of visibility of this particular context of impro. It is so outside of the mainstream that it is not even considered the avant-garde. Impro seems to sit in a peculiar place where perhaps it is misunderstood as 'variety', entertainment or even a party trick. This is not helped by its visibility in the mainstream being limited to *Whose Line is it Anyway?* and other television formats that remove the risk elements from improvising. Ruth, Pippa and Lucy discuss this in relation to the fact that in Canada and Australia this particular context of impro is respected because they have dedicated theatre spaces for impro 'because over here the only people people have really heard of is the Comedy Store Players and that's only because of *Whose Line is it Anyway?*'. Lucy adds; 'and even in radio interviews its like "so, its like *Whose Line is it Anyway?*"'. Here she is referring to the way others understand what it is she does, inevitably the only reference most people have for impro is a television show that ran for ten years in the UK between 1988 and 1998. Of the fifty-hour London Improvathon that many of the players were involved with Ruth states; 'these really beautiful speeches about how we loved each other, it was just like it was written' and Pippa retorts 'it was better than a written play to be honest but then in the next scene was people grieving and we're still weeping in the scene but is was so real, it was just real' thereby giving us a clue as to why these actors and comedians value impro more than scripted theatre. There is a depth of involvement in impro for them that they have not found in other work which is why, despite its marginality and relative invisibility they continue to commit to it. When Ruth states that her grandmother often asks her when she is going to do some legitimate theatre as opposed to improvised musicals.

Lucy gives an explanation of her view of where impro fits in relation to legitimate theatre:

> I think society values serious drama more than comedy although everybody loves to watch Morecombe and Wise or the Two Ronnies or whatever it might be that the nation is into at the time. So we've now kind of got more validity for comedy in fact even more so because you go to music festivals and everyone's at the standup comedy thing or people would go out or watch Mock the Week with all the stand-ups in it. People can connect with all the stand-ups now whereas before it used to be more serious actors. I used to have real problems justifying what I wanted to do [impro/comedy] against things like Shakespeare. So if you have that, and in relation to comedy you've got improvisation and that is an art from in itself and I still feel like we're at the stage when we're trying to make it valid and not just like *Whose Line is it Anyway?*

Lucy identifies a hierarchy of forms where serious drama and especially Shakespeare is at the top with stand-up comedy now not far behind or perhaps heading for the top. But impro as a form in itself, not as a tool for acting and devising but as a 'means in itself', as Ruth clarifies, is still barely recognised as a legitimate form of theatre, let alone an artform. It is seen more as a party trick, implying that it takes no great skill whereas in actual fact it takes an enormous amount of skill, practice, understanding and training to truly master. This fact is not appreciated by many in the profession. For example, Ruth goes on to describe an audition for a new member of her impro group, Scratch:

> There was this guy who came to the audition and he was great, he was brilliant and I called him up and said "we'd really like you to join the group" and he went "yeah, I don't really see the point of impro for itself [...] you know, I use impro to create theatre and devise things [...] and I don't see the point of it in itself. I don't understand what you do it for".

It seems that for this group of women, who are also professional actors, their involvement with impro and in particular Showstopper! The Improvised Musical is an opportunity to be freed from the constraints of legitimate theatre. Here impro's marginality enables a form of resistance. This is a space and time of resistance and freedom especially at the contested site of the female body. Ruth explores what these female improvisers are resisting in mainstream theatre and acting: 'an agent once said to me "Ruth, darling, you can either be an actress or a fat actress and at the moment you are neither" so I needed to become either really obese or anorexic'. Lucy validates this; 'yeah he said to me "you're too skinny to be a character actress but you'll never be cast as the main role"'. I asked them if impro has such a physical appearance limit to the characterisations of women. Pippa answers; 'There's no way that any one of us would ever *really* be cast in a musical because we're all slightly physically quirky. [but in Showstopper] you get to play the beautiful princess and it doesn't matter and you can play the hag'. Ruth adds: 'we got to do a Jane Austen the other day and we were so excited we were just like "oh, I've always wanted to be a Jane Austen girl and I'm never going to be" except during an improvisation'. Pippa continues, 'but then the next week you'll be the captain of a pirate ship and the week after that you're a monster in a painting'. It seems that they all value highly the opportunity they have as female improvisers to play with a far larger range of roles and identities than they would ever have access to as actors in legitimate theatre.

While Deborah, like myself, has had no formal acting training, Jana and Philippa are both trained actors. Deborah grew up in Australia where impro, and specifically Theatresports, had a cult status through visibility via a late night television show. This served to place impro as counter-cultural in a way that it has not been here in the UK so its marginality has more

visibility. More evidence for this lack of legitimacy or even counter-culture status for impro in the UK context can be seen in the following exchange:

> Deborah: yes yeah, Jana's the only one who isn't in the photos because she was away unfortunately.
> Jana: I was acting, darling!
> Deborah: were you?
> Philippa: on the legitimate stage!
> Jana: doing scripted work. I had lines to learn. Not slumming it in improv, swanning it in the making it up as you go along camp.

While this exchange is tongue-in-cheek it does, again, reveal the disconnect between improvised performance and scripted work and the perceived mainstream value of each performance form. These improvisers, however, highly value their impro experiences, despite its marginality and perhaps because of. Would participation in impro be so rewarding if it were to become legitimate or would it suddenly become prey to similar restrictions on physical experience and parts played?

Charlotte Gittins further explores the mainstream attitude towards impro when she reveals that during her time at Central School of Speech and Drama she was not trained in impro (arguably a very valuable tool for the student actor) because her 'performance tutors just sort of despised it' it was necessary for her to go outside of the mainstream of theatre training (The Spontaneity Shop) to re-experience the epiphany she had enjoyed when introduced to impro by a 'wonderful school teacher decades ago'.

Economically, impro sits outside the mainstream. Charlotte, Cariad Lloyd and Gemma Whelan conduct an exchange that explores the economies of impro which holds some clues as to why impro has remained outside of the theatre hegemony, based as it is on economies of exchange and barter rather than a more capitalist modus operandi:

> Cariad: [we got] this free space, amazing huge room in a georgian building in London Bridge. We had this huge room to run around in – to do whatever we wanted and the Canal [Cafe Theatre] gave us two shows every month for free. We had this kind of deal. So, we didn't have any pressure it was like 'Well we just have to fill two shows and we don't have to pay for the space'.
> Gemma: We didn't make any [money] (laughter)
> Cariad: We made a tiny amount which I will be honest is still resting in my account. The first fliers the Canal paid for and our [web] pages were done for free by the pianist who used to do [our] music.

These small economies of scale, run on barter, exchange and free gifts, while enabling The Institute to run and find some limited success, also, in their analysis, led to the group having a

finite life. The pull for the participants towards a more mainstream performance economy was too great to keep them in the marginal world of impro. Cariad states:

> Unfortunately one of the things that ended up with the group finishing was that there was no progression there was lots of people having lots of fun and then lots of people going, "well why are we doing this?'. A lot of them moved to stand up. I could see that they could see a progression in stand up. If I do these gigs I will get better gigs. So basically we had had this luxury of "Oh we have the Canal shows whatever happens we don't need to make money from them" so there was no step up there.

Charlotte adds: 'I swear there would be more of an improv community in London if it weren't such a massive financial dead end'. Contributing to the demise of this marginal impro group was the desire of some of the members to become 'legitimate' through embarking on a stand-up career which would give them more visibility, credibility and financial reward, a route identified earlier as having gained recognition over traditional theatre and performance.

They go on to identify *Showstopper* as arguably the most visibly and economically successful impro experiment to date, (for example they have recently had a Radio Four prime-time series) and propose that the reason for its success is down to the legitimate theatre experience and financial clout of those that run it. Cariad states:

> They're making money now I mean not much but I mean look at the people; Adam [Meggido] has been doing impro for about the same time as me but he's been producing plays for about fifteen years and he will say this is the latest product that has worked. He's had many that didn't work. Dylan runs a finance magazine for investment bankers so that's two people with their heads screwed on about money and then they had a plan and they knew what they wanted and I think, although I was great at running workshops, I did't really know what I wanted to do [with The Institute].

They clearly place impro outside of legitimate performance forms and, crucially, outside of the mainstream economy and demonstrate an example that shows that having a foot in a 'main stream' helps to legitimise or at least make impro more successful and visible. It is interesting to note as well that The Spontaneity Shop, owned and run by Deborah Frances-White and husband, Tom Salinsky, makes very little money from their impro workshops and shows, the bulk of their financial stability coming from corporate training inspired by their experience in impro techniques for which they can charge large sums of money. The workshops break even only (conversation with the owners).

The Showstopper performers do get paid as Pippa informs:

> We get paid per show but if you actually factored as much time as we're actually giving, everyone gives up every Sunday [for practice] a journey to a show [on the

> tour] can take up to 11 hours of your day because you've got to drive there and back. We make sure we all watch musicals every week. I get to rehearsals early so I can set the room up so we don't have any faffing you know so if you factor all that in you probably spend about twenty-four hours a week on it. So if you think about it like that for twenty-four hours you get fifty pounds.

I ask them if they are there are more financially rewarding performance routes they could be exploring and Ruth answers:

> Yes, but nothing as spiritual and I think also that there's the thing about *Showstopper* that whether it is commercially the most successful and I think at the moment it seems to be one of the things that's taken off and that's brilliant.

Pippa adds 'I don't think anyone does anything arty for money' thereby firmly siting impro in an 'alternative' economy.

Cariad refers to her experiences of working in professional theatre and the way in which impro is used as a devising tool: 'and the show I just toured we improvised the whole thing but then you get into theatre and find out they call it "devising" and you're like "oh, right, what?" and they just write down impro which as an improviser I was like "what? are you going to [write our improvisations down]?" And that was really hard for me'. The ephemeral and disposable nature of impro is an important feature to these improvising women and one that helps to maintain its marginal status. In addition, Charlotte refers back to her time in mainstream theatre education where: 'at Central my terrifying drama tutor, boy did she suck the joy out of devising, put me off going back to impro for a while and I think it can be used just horribly unless you just sort of play, unless you have a sense of play with it, it can be like succubus'. These comments serve to highlight once again the lack of understanding of impro in certain hegemonic theatre contexts. Charlotte goes on to confirm the need for impro to create its own legitimised space; 'I also think that's the lack at the moment of any, you know, like they've got elsewhere, is a venue which is an improv venue and actually if there were a London improv venue like you see in places like New York actually I think that would see another big upsurge in impro'. Cariad adds:

> And I think it's trying to get people into improv when all they know is *Whose Line is it Anyway?* and its still most people still go "d'you remember *Whose Line...?*" I do that, that's what I say to explain it.

I asked Cariad if she thinks that improvisers are selling themselves short with the continuous comparison to an old television show that did not demonstrate all that impro can achieve. She replies:

> Yeah I suppose but then I suppose I'm usually explaining it when I'm temping to someone who's like "oh are you an actor?" So it's like for me I can't be bothered to get into...but if I want to sell something like the Improvathon well "I'm doing this thing it's fifty hours you have to come it's the most amazing..." so it depends.

Cariad explains that the Improvathon does get some visibility due to its extreme nature, but is disappointed that it does not get recognition for actually being really good impro. The group also discuss the mainstreaming and legitimising of impro, in particular Theatresports in Canada where it is taught in schools and the competitive format has created a league with competitions and prestigious awards. This recognition of the form creates a measurable scale of quality 'in Canada they do it from fourteen and when you go over there the sixteen-year-olds are better than anyone you meet here' (Cariad) and, crucially 'you don't have to explain what it is' (Charlotte). Cariad tells a story about her visit to Canada:

> When me and Paul went to Canada we got stopped at customs because Paul was a little chatty with the customs man, which he is known to do, and we had to have all our bags searched and they were asking us why are you coming over? We were doing a show, we weren't getting paid, so we weren't actually doing anything wrong but on paper we were. And I said I was an actor and he said "why are you coming here?" and I said "I'm going to watch an impro show". I didn't tell them I was in it and he said "oh improviser are you? So is that how you make your money" And I burst out laughing said "No!" and he looked at me so unbelievingly and went "oh" and packed the bags and went "okay fine". But I thought "wow there, that's a country were a customs man would assume I was coming to make money out of impro".

Charlotte describes an example from the UK context that demonstrates the lack of understanding that is in stark contrast to the status and understanding of impro in Canada:

> I work in TV production, and they took a programme format from Australia were improv is obviously very big and they put it on ITV. It was hideous and basically they got a few people in to improvise with celebrities. They clearly weren't letting the improvisers improvise at all. I was working at the company that took that format on so I saw the development process. They got a bunch of people, none of whom knew anything about impro and they made a safe show and, to be fair, you can't get improv on telly because its not a safe thing to do usually but they just made this kind of bland thing, presumably won't get another series and everybody was just like oh right so what's impro again?

This attitude to impro from TV producers stems from impro's lack of visibility and continued 'otherness' to the mainstream, mainstream comedy, mainstream theatre, the mainstream economy, mainstream entertainment here in the UK. Impro cannot be controlled or planned for, so producers and commissioning editors are scared of it. The recent furore over Jack Whitehall and James Corden's appearance on *The Big Fat Quiz of the Year* (Channel Four) gives a clue as to the reason for this. Despite this show not being live and, therefore, being edited, the unscripted antics of these two comedians/actors garnered a hysterically critical Daily Mail article (Gladdis and Elicott, 2013) and tens of complaints to the regulator. This is the danger that TV stations face with airing anything that has not been tightly controlled. When Johnstone asks improvisers not to censor themselves and trust that it is okay to reveal things it is clear

that impro needs to not be constrained by propriety or sensibilities. This is at odds with TV's need for relatively safe material. When some of the Showstopper cast appeared on CBBC's *The Slammer* (2010) to do a short musical improvisation it was clear that the material that emerged was constrained by the fact that this was a children's show and the improvisers had to self-censor to create age appropriate material in their improvisations.

These factors and considerations places impro in a marginal and invisible position in relation to the controllable and tamed performance hegemony: yet all these improvisers express a real love and passion for impro that keeps them coming back to practice it despite the lack of professional and financial recognition and reward. Patti Styles, whose context is Australia and who trained with Keith Johnstone in Canada is in a good position to see the global picture, states; 'I feel sad that with such a global focus on improvisation being only comedy we have lost so much of our potential. Improvisers have a voice. We create theatre. Theatre questions, reveals, explores, asks and demands' ("Scenes That Matter", 12/10/11)[19] in this statement she is understanding impro to be much more than comedy and for appealing for its visibility and value to be claimed as on a par with legitimate theatre, equal but different. Gemma is passionate when she cites Ken Campbell as saying '"improvising can be, and is largely, infinitely more interesting than theatre". And it was magic because, aah, we were making theatre. He really treated it as theatre'.[20]

Impro challenges the dominant order of the scripted stage and its licensed professionalism. So much so that even participants who are professional actors will participate outside of the norms of production and consumption because it feels like a special, rarified space and time – especially the Improvathon. The Improvathon creates a carnivalesque liminality where players, and audience, enter a reified space and time that exists outside of the norms of everyday experience. Co-creating a performance in the now is a liminal activity. It is neither work, nor play as separated activities, that which Turner refers to as liminoid. It is liminal because it is ergic-ludic. Practitioners take it very seriously, work hard to improve their practice. Indeed regular practice is essential for improvement. All this takes commitment and yet there is very little, if any, of the usual rewards for work (remunerative). The rewards for

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[19] A note about referencing: in order that the reader may go to the source of quotes from Patti Stiles' blog the bibliography entry with read as; Stiles, Patti (2010) *Impro Blog Spot* ...and the main site URL will be stated there. The reference in brackets in the text is the title of the blog entry and the date it was entered which can easily be found in the archival section of the blog. This system has been created to avoid making a bibliography entry for every blog section but so that the reader can easily go to the exact entry in the absence of page numbers.

[20] Generally I have removed these types of exclamations from the quotes for clarity's sake, however, I felt that this sound was so evocative of the feeling of wonder that was being expressed that in this instance I left it in the text.

participation lie in the feelings of well-being that are induced by co-creating together in the moment. These rewards are more usually associated with play, or at least children's play.

6.3 Marginality of Women in Impro

Reflecting western cultural norms, the female improvisers also felt marginal within impro. This, perhaps, could be seen to be reflected in impro's marginal position in relation to legitimate theatre performance. Many issues around gender and impro have been raised by the interviewees. This is perhaps because I raised it as a question during the interviews and framed the research as 'the female experience of impro' to the interviewees, thereby influencing their frame of reference for the interviews, it being a concern of mine. This is an example of where my preoccupations have influenced the data. As the researcher, my preoccupation with gender in impro is clear in the self-interview and stem from the experience of working in groups with differing gender balances:

> I did struggle for a bit and the genders were so unbalanced, with only two women out of ten men. There were times during shows when the scenes would be so "boys' own" that there was no room for us. It felt quite constrictive and for a while I wasn't having fun. I felt as if I was not only constraining myself in my character choices but being constrained as well, particularly by the men in the group. It felt that the improvisation was constrained too, a bit stuck. Fearful, if the audience weren't laughing then it wasn't any good. Whereas I prefer impro that offers the audience more than just the opportunity to laugh.
>
> (self-interview)

Once the gender balance had changed in this group to be more balanced between the sexes performances calmed down a little and we were able to do more subtle work.

The chapter, "He Said, She Said", from the oral history *Something Like a Drug* (Foreman and Martini, 1995), is a series of interview excerpts from improvisers who have originated from the context of Johnstone's training and impro theatre in Canada. In this chapter they are discussing impro and gender. The excerpts are framed as an oral history and are, therefore, the lived experiences of female improvisers. There is evidence that these improvisers have had similar experiences and feelings as I expressed above. For example:

> The scene is drawing to a close. Suddenly I'm picked off my feet and tucked under the arm of one of my teammates. He bellows, "I've got the girl, you grab the beer and let's go!" As the ultimate prop, I'm carried off stage and put down amongst the hats and coats.
>
> (Foreman and Martini, 1995, 128)

It seems that when the gender balance of groups is more equal or more female that there is a different energy, for example Cariad says of The Institute:

> There was a lot of women who were very supportive of each other and friends with each other outside the group and that made a nice atmosphere [...] I've been in groups when it's mostly men as there's a different atmosphere. Not necessarily less supportive but they support in a different way. Whenever we were doing an Institute show [...] naturally someone would grab you and go "well done, well done" and when you work with men you don't get that [and] we really did have this glory time when we all got on and it was like, six or seven women in it as the time and everybody, it literally was you'd spend the whole time being hugged or told you were being wonderful.

Gemma agrees; 'It was very nurturing, I really loved that – "how about we try this way?" It was always positive. It was wonderful'. This balance of gender being more female also seems to have allowed the women in the group to play with their genders:

> We'd often play boys. We'd often play relationships, two women play relationships, but is was so incredibly comfortable that we never even felt it remotely as an issue. Like, me and Gemma would have a scene where we would probably kiss [...] and it was just being that comfortable with people that it was literally never mentioned at all [...] I've never experienced that again, every time I've done other improv I've always ended up being the girlfriend or mistress and ended up in a sex scene, a romantic scene which in the Institute we would have whole scenes without romance. We'd all be playing tramps for an hour, no one cared.
>
> (Cariad)

Charlotte concurs:

> You'll be playing a guy in a scene and, which is absolutely fine, and you're completely fine with it as a girl [...] but it is very odd if you're onstage, and it'll often happen with a guy, sometimes with a girl, where you set yourself up, you are clearly a guy and then it's like "well she said..." and, you know, it just gets stripped off you [...] you do get people who are on stage, clearly are just looking at you, they're seeing a girl, there is no conceivable way that, even though you've said it fifteen times, that you're a guy.

One of the women interviewed for the oral history states baldly: 'I've played a man, I think, once' (Foreman and Martini, 1995, 131). For Deborah, Philippa and Jana, who at one stage formed the all female group Hell on Heels, this was never a problem in this all-female context:

> Because it was all women you could so easily play a man and it would be accepted immediately [...] it would be much more readily acceptable if there were no men in the show [...] I often found it fun to play men because then I found it easier to play high status because I was playing more of a character and could hide behind that.

Here, Jana is identifying the lower status of women on the impro stage. In order to play high status, for her, she had to cross genders. Deborah highlights the liberation that came with

playing cross-gender; 'I'll jump up and be a man and because you were always seeing it from a woman's point of view some of the insights were very funny or fresh'.

However, at The Spontaneity Shop we were taught not to play cross-gender if all genders were actually available in the bodies of the players – from the self-interview:

> I did try, in my first session in level three I remember trying to play a bloke (though probably looked more gender neutral than anything and, therefore, not really adding much to the scene) and our teacher Tom said that in a mixed gender group improvisers should avoid playing cross gender. So I stopped. I thought that part of the joy of improv would be the opportunity to play so against type that you could switch gender but it wasn't part of the culture at the Spon Shop. This did stymie me a bit and shoe-horn me into playing female gender stereotypes. I think all the women in the group tried to fight against that but we probably didn't work together enough as a group to build enough trust to be really bold in our character choices.
>
> (self-interview)

However, even without the possibilities of playing cross-gender identities women can be typecast into traditional female roles in impro. Deborah says:

> If you are a woman and you are unhappy with the way you're constantly relegated to be the secretary or the sex bomb or whatever and you're not getting a fair crack. I would ask myself: "Who am I improvising with?"; "Do I share these people's values?". It's not a matter of training people who don't believe in equality or have issues with women to pretend to hide those onstage. It's a matter of finding people who respect women offstage.

In Showstopper, as a group they seem to have found those shared values:

> I think Showstopper isn't that standard – you're allowed two girls and four boys. It doesn't fit any of those standards and its like everyone's had to find a new way of working and the boys have had to find a different way of fitting around what we do which you know sometimes it's really interesting in Showstopper, we've talked about this before, the girls are funny the boys aren't and it's the wrong way around you know normally/ if you're going by what the normal pattern is the boys are really funny and the girls just you know but in Showstopper the women are much funnier, naturally, than the men because most of the boys are proper serious actors and we're just donkeying about going, doing funny stuff.
>
> (Ruth)

Ruth also states; 'I think one reason why women often get trampled on in impro is because they are more aware of allowing for other things and they allow for gaps and one of the things that Showstopper is about is allowing the gaps'. An example of going to extreme lengths, as a woman, to create the gaps can be found in the self-interview:

> I remember one show where I had felt quite controlled and pushed around by one particular (male) improviser/character. At one point he was screaming in my ear and spitting in my face and I/my character had had enough so she pulled out a 'gun' and shot him. From then on in every scene this improviser entered he was shot by one of the other improvisers (we had found the 'game' of the show). This was fun for all of us, even the improviser who kept getting killed as it enabled him to remain the centre of attention (his dad had come to see him) whilst allowing the rest us to have fun with him. This, in a way, turned a corner for me in understanding that, even if I'm feeling hemmed in by a scene, this is improvisation and anything can happen as long as I am fearless and bold.
>
> (self-interview)

Extreme reactions to feeling bullied and pigeon-holed on stage can occur off stage as well:

> The only female in the cast said, "Hey I'm sick and tired of being your *fucking* girlfriend, your *fucking* mother, and your *fucking* wife, you know. Give me a break!" This blew up after a show, I mean, she just went, "Did you know that tonight I was a whore *twice*, a housewife, a mother and a nurse".
>
> (Foreman and Martini, 1995, 134, emphases in original)

Ruth recounts an example where this subjugation of female characters and by extension the female improviser goes far too far. In the scene her character is essentially raped by 'robot transformers' played by the male improvisers: 'It wasn't as if I thought any of them were going to [really do it] so it didn't feel uncomfortable them doing that to me because we know each other so well, we know each others' boundaries'. But, as Lucy points out 'that doesn't happen in musicals' and Ruth agrees 'no it doesn't happen in musicals and I think we all felt that the content had just got away with us and we were like woah where is this going?'. It is interesting that Ruth feels okay with this extreme scene and it is probably down to the fact that the group have worked together so much and feel so comfortable with each others' boundaries as Ruth pinpoints. This demonstrates the potential for a playfulness even around the extremity of the representation of sexual violence, in the next section I will examine further the themes of playfulness explored by the interviewees. It also is an extreme manifestation of the idea raised in the oral history chapter of woman as prop or object on the impro stage.

The fact that women seem to improvise differently when given the space to through a more favourable gender balance in the group plays out in the oral histories too: 'women work really well as a group because we kind of look out for each other and go along slowly' (Foreman and Martini, 1995, 139). Also:

> We, I feel, listen better – we're on a different pacing a lot of times....The improvisers here leave each other space. If you don't talk for five seconds someone isn't going to charge in and start yammering or push you physically aside, and people don't leap on stage making huge physical offers, which I find intimidating as a player and as a woman.
>
> (Foreman and Martini, 1995, 129)

> My stage rhythms are usually pretty slow [...] I'm not talking about acting, pacing. I'm talking about the way I assimilate information, process it and spit is back out. And I don't think men want to wait [...] men don't think in terms of "us".
> (Foreman and Martini, 1995, 129-130)

These differences in modes and paces of playing mean that women are at odds with a more masculine way of playing. Yet Johnstone himself trains improvisers to listen, be attentive and look after your stage partner. Both Johnstone and Campbell, whilst at first glance could belong to the dominant order (white, male, middle class), are, in fact, marginal figures in theatre having positioned themselves as rule breaking mavericks. In relation to the dominant forms of theatre they are subjugated knowers.

Short form impro is perhaps a more common place to find, what I will term, 'panicky impro' where every space is filled. With longer forms such as Showstopper and the Improvathon, where scenes build a larger story arc, there is more space for slower and more thoughtful impro with pathos. There is also less need for the players to elicit laughter from the audience. This is because there are stories and characters that the audience can engage with and care about so the players do not feel any pressure to perform for the immediate feedback of laughter. Perhaps, for women this less pressurised mode of improvising is also a more playful way of performing. It is clear that the lived experience of female improvisers is somewhat at odds with the ideas of nomadic and fluid female identities proposed by Braidotti and Butler that are engaged with in Chapter Three. There seems to be no room for fluidity in gender identity on the impro stage. Women are fixed in particularly rigid and stereotypical and traditional female identities. This raises the possibility that Mulvey's discredited notion of the male gaze in performance is coming into play at the site of the improvising female body. Specifically, the scopophilic and narcissistic aspects of Mulvey's theory of the male gaze are being played out through the male improviser in relation to the female. However, it is also clear that some of Haraway's notions of networks and Braidotti's notions of the affinities between women are also played out between the female improvisers and seem to occur more readily when the gender balance is more equal or exclusively female. This allows for a different kind of impro, one that is slower and more acknowledging of co-creation. In all-female groups there is also the opportunity to play across gender and enter a world-upside-down play space that Bakhtin and Zemon-Davis would recognise as carnivalesque. In slower-paced, long form formats there is more opportunity to invert the stereotypes that reinforce Foucault's dominant order through a character's story arc. However, in groups where men outnumber women, it seems that Bakhtin's notion, that within the carnivalesque the players can adopt any identity they choose, does not play out in the lived experience of female improvisers.

6.4 Playfulness

Patti Stiles has committed herself to write a blog about her love for impro which she travels around the world teaching and performing. She is one of the rare people who have managed to make a career out of impro – she does not have a 'day job'. Her love of impro stems from her experience of training at Loose Moose in Calgary with Keith Johnstone; 'In the beginning we all fell in love with the joy of the doing, the pure enjoyment. I know I lived my life around any chance to be at the Loose Moose and play. I'm pretty sure most people experience this as well. That simple and pure love of the doing, the playing, the experience for the sake of the experience' ("On the Wind", 20/08/10). Patti's considerable experience in impro leads her to see this 'pure love of the doing' in other aspects of life and culture, she has attuned herself to seeing this everywhere and so her blog often reflects upon her observation of this quality in non-impro contexts as well ("Remove the Fear vs. Improve the Armour", 22/08/10). She is also aware that there are impro contexts where, due perhaps to poor teaching or misunderstanding of the basic principles, there are people who haven't experienced this same joy; 'I feel sad that not everyone has experience [sic] that joy of working with the truly like minded. I really would like everyone to experience that rush and for that feeling to be the norm not the special treat' ("The Abandoneers" 5/10/10). Later, in an entry on the eyes during improvised performances she says:

> When it happens with another performer I know they are in and lit up. They are feeling that surge of delight one gets when you've been inspired. The inspiration can come from challenge, the unexpected, the scene, the playfulness, or just the sheer joy of that moment. When I see it in their eyes, it fills me as well. It is a real joy to see someone light up, and such a wonderful experience.
>
> ("The Eyes Have It", 8/11/10)

Several times here Patti has mentioned 'play', 'playing', 'playfulness' and connected to the joy of and passion for doing impro. A joy of being in the moment of creation, 'making it up as you go along' is perhaps something that many people have not experienced since playing as children, or perhaps, those that are drawn to improvise have re-found a way of playing that enables them to continue to experience and develop their playful selves.

An experience I had in a workshop run by Patti demonstrates Patti's ability as a teacher to create a playful space and time where the usual boundaries of behaviour and propriety can be suspended. My real life fiancé, Lucas, was in a scene with Cariad Lloyd where they were playing flatmates who had a secret crush on each other. The impro game being played was 'He Said, She Said' which is a game where, after the scene partner's line the other partner says to the audience "he said pressing his lips against hers", for example, in a film noir narration style. So after each line of dialogue a physical action is given to the player whose line it was by the other player. They have to do that action and only that action, wait for the other person's line

and then give them an action following the same format. It is a wonderful way for the players to move the scene on physically, create subtext and playfully control each others' actions. The problem in this particular case was that both my fiancé and Cariad were painfully aware that they were having to play a love scene in front of me and so were both holding back from moving along the subtext of flatmates in love with each other. Patti stopped the scene and said 'even Lucas's girlfriend is going "get it on. get it on!"' (journal notes). In fact Patti, as the workshop leader, had noticed my joy at the thought of Cariad and Lucas playing this scene out properly and with full commitment and my frustration that they were not She voiced this, giving them permission to go there and allowing them to fulfil the promise of the scene. This meant that they were freed to really play. She could see in my eyes that I wanted them to go for it and she could see in their eyes that they were holding back because of my presence. The improvisers were worried about the unknown territory of performing a romantic scene in front of an actual partner but it was just playing and make believe, not real. Patti expresses a love for this unknowable playful space and time, 'I love the opening of a new notebook. The blank page, the open opportunity, the potential. It is this same love of the unknown that I crave in impro' ("The Unknown Awaits" 28/12/10). Patti strongly associates her love of impro with a love of the unknown. This is contrary to common belief, finding cultural manifestations in films and books, that the unknown is a site of fear and dread. Actually the unknown, in impro, is a place to go into playfully and with openness to find out what adventures and stories exist there.

Gemma describes her time spent at The Institute as 'pretty magic'. Charlotte states that the teacher who introduced her at school to impro gave her a moment of epiphany: 'I do remember just thinking "Oh God, this makes total sense". I mean the first time I really made people laugh in the class and I was just like "oh I want to do this forever" and when she is not improvising, Cariad says 'I can't bear that I'm not doing it, it does my head in'. There is a real sense of commitment and passion for the form running through the whole interview that Cariad, Gemma and Charlotte gave and a sense of wistful regret, whilst talking about it, that The Institute had ended. However, they all three are continuing to improvise in other contexts. Another group, Jana, Deborah and Philippa, whilst still utilising the skills learnt through impro, were no longer practising regularly and they all expressed that the very act of talking about impro during the interview stirred their desire to resume their practice. After graduating from RADA, Philippa was reluctant to do impro but was persuaded and fell in love with it immediately. Jana, too was terrified to do impro initially but once she started and, in particular started performing 'it was the most exhilarating experience I ever had and I was like, "I've got to do this forever now"'. Deborah's passion began at a young age, growing up in Australia and eventually became a passion for teaching impro.

For Ruth, Showstopper is:

> My favourite thing. By far and away my favourite thing to do. The solo show that I did [stand-up], that was fine and there was kind of a thrill to it and a pride to it but I didn't enjoy it as much as getting up and being silly with these guys [...] I've never found anything that gives you that buzz, that real feeling of achievement and I love the fact that once you've done it, it's never seen again and that's it, gone, and you can [...] get better but you can never make that thing you did better'.

Later she states 'I think all of us would give up everything else if *Showstopper* paid the rent! Not made money, just paid the rent [...] I wouldn't do anything else'. This is perhaps because of some of the experiences she has had:

> There have been moments when I have been in tears in *Showstopper* because somebody has done something so wonderful and beautiful [...] It's a beautiful thing when you find that emotion that is very real and is universal and is something that everyone has felt or can feel and connect with [...] I think that's why I find impro, especially the impro that we're doing so exciting because it allows for that. It's not just about comedy [...] but it is hilarious by its very nature but there's something wonderful about allowing the full range of emotions. And I think it makes you more open in life.

So this is a serious playfulness with important benefits for these female improvisers. All of the players express a deep love and joy of impro and a passion for doing it despite the 'illegitimacy' of impro of the type defined by the thesis. This passion palpably flows through all of the interviews. This again, is despite the lack of recognition, visibility and financial reward offered by the performance form, certainly in comparison to other forms of practice. Personally, my own passion for impro has grown during the time I have been practising it and exponentially since I focussed on it for the purposes of this thesis. One of the foci of this thesis is the Improvathon which is an intense and concentrated time of improvising that most of the interviewees have experienced (all but Jana and Philippa) and that I have experienced as a practice and an experience in impro. As we have seen, this is a commitment over several days to stay awake, improvising, as a group. No one is paid to do it and yet all give up their time willingly to commit to this period of time without sleep that has a considerable recovery period afterwards. In fact, improvisers beg to be allowed to do it and, as the cast numbers are limited by necessity (it would become too unwieldy for the director if there were too many players) not everyone can. These facts demonstrate a passion for impro and, in particular the Improvathon, that, based on the obvious rewards (visibility, renumeration), seems unfounded at first glance. The collected data reveal, over and over again, this theme of passionate commitment to the practice of impro. This passion and commitment makes this a serious playfulness as opposed to a frivolous playfulness. In Turner's terms it is ergic-ludic – work and play combined together

What mechanism allows this serious playfulness to occur? It is all very well saying jump into the unknown and play but how does an improviser know how to do that, what is the technique? All of the improvisers identify the technique of 'yes-anding' as the how of playful creation and many have applied this technique to other areas of life – for example relationships (Patti, Ruth, Lucy), writing screenplays (Philippa, Deborah) and being mothers (Jana). 'Yes-and' is fundamental to playing and involves accepting your scene partner or playmate's offer and building on it. Without this basic tenet the playfulness is consumed by conflict. This conflict is not in the scene or the narrative as plenty of scenes can be about the drama of human conflict. The conflict is between the improvisers who cannot begin to be in the moment, playing together, if they cannot agree to build the scene complicitly. This single technique of 'yes-anding' prevents the players from blocking or ignoring the input of their fellow players, makes sure they are listening to their partner and ensures that the story of scene is developed step by step through building it together, offer by offer. An example of how this can also be applied outside of impro lies in the self interview where I recount teaching my son, who is on the autistic spectrum, how to play. His autism meant that it was hard for him, at primary school, not to want to control the play he was having with other children and be in total charge of it leading him to be isolated and misunderstood by his neuro-typical peers. I taught him intellectually how to 'yes-and' with the other children, accepting and building on their offers in the play space and time and this improved his social position. Now he is at secondary school, where the content and context of play is different, and he has very good social standing; in fact, he is referred to as 'a legend' by most of his peers. I put this miraculous turn around down, in part, to his learning how to 'yes-and' his playmates.

The alternate aspect to this spontaneous playfulness in impro is that it triggers some fearful protection of the ego due to the venturing into the unknown. Most of the Players mention, at some point, ego and fear as barriers to successful, or rather playful, impro experiences. Lucy articulates: 'how vulnerable you can feel when you're performing and how, because it's not planned, you are offering up your personality and your vulnerability and your honesty and I think we forget that we have to look after each other [...] especially with new people because their ego will still be there'. Pippa adds, 'our egos have kind of disappeared recently'. Here they are identifying the fearfulness of leaping into the unknown that is part of the practice of impro and they have associated the intensification of that fear with newness to impro. Arguably Ruth, Lucy and Pippa, due to their experience with Showstopper are the most experienced improvisers in this study (apart from Patti) and they are certainly the players who are training and performing most intensively and regularly. They rehearse weekly and can have at least two shows a week around the country. It is this intensity of training that perhaps

enabled Pippa's observation of the 'disappearance' of their egos. This statement needs a little unpacking as perhaps she means two things: firstly that their experience means that their egos are not so fragile anymore and secondly, crucially, that their intensity of working as a group means that their egos have de-individuated to become part of the group mind, thereby protecting them from the vulnerable state of being an individual playing alone. I would assert that this group of improvisers from Showstopper are fully immersed in playing together by way of the intensely ergic-ludic context they have created through their successful improvised show format. My frustrations around my impro training and experiences are that I have yet to really experience this communal play and yet I crave it. The times that I have glimpsed it, yet not fully de-individuated due to fear, are during my Improvathon experiences. Pippa explores this notion of de-individuation further:

> I think it's really good at getting rid of your ego as well. Your ego really goes once you've been [doing it a while]. When we first started Showstopper I remember we'd all have shows where we cried at the end "oh it's awful I was the worst I didn't have a part blah blah blah". You just have to learn that sometimes you're gonna be the star and sometimes you're gonna be a tree. You're just as important [being] the tree that happens to move at the right time.

So this removal of ego also becomes a revision of the notion of what is a 'good part' in performance. Pippa, Ruth and Lucy also discuss how being the protagonist can be a much less rewarding a more difficult job in impro than being the 'spear-carrier' or other 'extra' because, in Showstopper at least, the protagonist has the challenging job of bringing all the disparate strands of narrative together at the end of the show.

Patti, above, expressed a joy in the unknown, but, especially when starting out and making the decision to participate in impro almost all of the participants felt a sense of fear, in particular those that had a traditional theatre training or background. Personally I have not experienced fear in performance much; I rarely get stage fright; in fact I am far less likely to get stage fright if I am improvising than if I have a script or choreography that I have to get right. I do, however, hold back and have doubts about making bold offers. I have doubts that the offers I make are what my partner wants. I doubt my own ability to be complicit and make the best contribution to the group. This is evident in two examples from my self-interview, both from the context of the Improvathon:

> It was after my character had been 'written out' of the soap as my shift was over and the director had called for a children's nativity genre for a court scene. Seamus Allen was playing a detective and in the nativity was playing a convincing five-year-old child. I was so tired and trippy by this stage having been awake for two days that I started 'yes-anding' that I was his parent in the audience by waving to him. He accepted this offer and then started indicating that he needed a wee wee. I was miming for him to stay there, he started crying and calling for mummy. Eventually I went to the side of the stage and he came out of the nativity and had

> a cuddle. Then the scene ended. This was the most authentic connection that I made during this Improvathon. It felt incredibly real. He was basing his acting on his experience of being a Dad and I was basing mine on being a Mum and we were both totally 'in it'. Even then I had a little critic in the back of my mind going – does he want this, is this the right thing to do, should I, what will the director think? And it is always these doubts that screw me up as an improviser instead of just going for it.

In Liverpool I had a similar experience with the doubts in my head but ignored them much more. It was a scene early on in the Improvathon in which the Mandelbrot family were having a meeting in the restaurant of the hotel. Bobby Davro, the hotel porter, and my character, Silkie Sheets, the hotel chambermaid, jumped up to serve the family. We found a game of going backstage, and picking up weirder and weirder stuff to serve to the family, just general objects that were lying around culminating in a ball of string that Silkie put in Honey Moon's fingers and unwound around the stage, backstage and back into Honey's hands so that it totally enveloped the whole scene. It was just such a playful moment. The scene between the family was continuing as Bobby and I silently played the game and it was such a pleasure to play, even though the doubts were still there.

Also in Liverpool I had an experience that really knocked my ego and one that I still feel a sense of shame about today. It was an example of not listening or paying attention enough to what was going on because my ego wanted stage time. This was during children's hour where the players get a chance to drop story lines for a while and just do crazy and fun things for the children in the audience. Two of the characters were eloping to Vegas to get married. I jumped up to be useful and joined the scene as an air hostess when they were on the plane. The couple started discussing who they would get to be a witness at their wedding and I took this offer to mean that they could ask me, the air hostess. I kept appearing in places in the scene, even when they had disembarked the plane, where they could ask me to perform this function, not realising that, in fact, the offer was that one of the children from the audience would be asked on stage to perform this function and I was getting in the way of this. My ego was so fixed on the idea of my offer to the scene that I could not see or hear that this was not was the scene needed and not what the improvisers playing the couple were asking to be offered. I wasn't 'yes-anding' I was 'yes-butting'. I sat down in the players' space (see figure 3) and felt mortified when I realised what had happened. It was not a disaster: this was impro, it does not matter, it is throwaway theatre but I had not been a very good, helpful improviser at that point and that is what feels shameful.

I think this sense of shame does stem from ego or at least a fragile one. There is a sense of not wanting to go wrong, but there is no wrong in impro, everything is an offer so why do the doubts remain? As Patti says, 'Improvisation thrives in the risk and unknown. The risk

and unknown are created when players are playful' ("On the Wind", 20/08/10). Play requires generosity and doubt prevents an improviser from being generous. Why have doubt unless I am wanting to protect myself from being wrong? And what am I protecting? My ego. Patti also discusses the trap I fell into above, and identifies it as an ego protection strategy – improvisers who are intent on making their own offers and not accepting the offers of others. They are protecting their egos and preventing their de-individuation:

> Many improvisers have become Communication Illusionists they look like they are listening, they may sound like they are accepting but in reality they are not. What they are doing is looking for their launch points, the information they need to shine, succeed, get a laugh. Communication is give and take. These illusionists are experts at the take. Watch them closely and their give is weak and hidden in their own need. They are clever though and can further hide this lack of generosity in great energy, cleverness or charm. They also tend to avoid any scenes with real emotion or genuine connection between characters.
>
> ("Communication Illusionists", 29/08/10)

As Patti identifies, poor improvisers can be great performers, but they are hard to *play with* because they are not playful, as to be playful participants need to 'yes-and' rather than 'yes-but' or 'no-not' – approaches to impro which do not engender co-creation. This unwillingness to 'yes-and' combined with the ability to perform with 'great energy, cleverness or charm' stems from a strange paradox between a big, confident ego and an unacknowledged fear of the loss of that ego through de-individuation. In her blog, Patti begs the reader not to 'give in to the fear of failure grabbing us and altering our work' lest we create work that is 'self-indulgent crap fuelled by fear, panic and disconnection' where 'I've seen improvisers be aggressive, demeaning, abusive and violent' ("Agendas in Impro", 23/09/10). Deborah relates an experience that clearly illustrates this problem where she was performing in an impro competition in New Zealand and in a scene with a group of men from another group with whom she had no prior experience:

> They want[ed] to do a very highly charged gag game impro set that's pretty misogynistic in content so I'll just hang off. I don't need to be in these scenes and if that's the game, that's the game. I've been in lots of shows I don't need this show so I'll just stand on the side and not go in. But they kept dragging me in that was the problem.

The main thrust of this came from the male leader of the group, a minor celebrity:

> Just to give you an idea of his ego, his poster was larger than the poster for the Madonna tour and that's when I remember thinking "shit this guy's got a real ego on him".

The scene was about this man playing the character of a porn star, so there was a misogynist bent from the start that Deborah had decided to playfully subvert by playing a disappointed

fan who had hoped that he respected the women he worked with and was upset to find that he did not.

> This other guy from LA held me, physically restrained me and said 'beat her up beat her up!' and these guys had done a lot of coke that night so it was like 'fucking bash her face in' you know.

Again, trying to be playful and thinking about how the audience might be feeling about witnessing this Deborah shouts out:

> "Freeze! Audience, shout "Yay!" if you want him to win" and some bloke went "yeah" "and shout "Yay!" if you want her to win" and the whole audience went "Yay!" And so that meant my character could win but I thought well that is quite a fun way of going "well I don't think the audience is going to be entirely comfortable with her being beaten to a pulp by a porn star".

Unfortunately the egos at play within the male group and especially the minor celebrity were not going to take this:

> But from that point on as far as they were concerned I was a huge great big fuck-off feminist who deserved everything she got and I don't think that was being particularly feminist. I just think it was being sensitive to the discomfort of me and the rest of the audience and that it was just a horrible scene.

What followed was a continuation of the scene where Deborah tried to leave the stage but the other players kept bringing her back on in order to keep humiliating her in the guise of playing a scene. The training she had received meant that Deborah was trying to continue being a 'good improviser' by 'yes-anding' their offers until eventually:

> The coked up guy turned all these chairs upside-down with these spiky legs like that and said 'right we're going to play a game now where at any point one of the improvisers can push the other improvisers into the chairs'. And that was the game. And I was like, 'okay, guess who is going to get pushed into the chairs based on tonight's performance? I don't think it's going to be any of you. I'm going to get impaled on a chair!' And I thought 'okay I am an improviser I must put on a show and say "Yes-and" but I am a person first and I don't want to be pushed into chairs' so I just went 'I'm going to go and get a cappuccino!' and went out into the foyer.

Philippa, who was in the audience at the time, analyses what the problem was by this time with the scene:

> The rules had changed by then, it was no longer about creating any narrative or creating any team camaraderie. So that, looking back on it, that was the problem. You were still trying to make the show work and they were beyond that. They were in the kind of mud pit if you like.

The story also really illustrates the very worst that can happen when egos are at the forefront of the work and the players are not listening to each other or playing together.

Part of the problem here is playing with people an improviser does not know. Avoiding these kinds of scenarios comes more easily when working with the same group of people for an extended period of time whether an impro group or during the Improvathon. Gemma says; 'it's friendship leading to trust; leading to good scenes that you can hold each other up on rather than a sort of loose cannon'. Charlotte adds 'if you totally trust someone then leaping into the abyss isn't so scary anymore'. Gemma again, 'it's fun and you want to play together'. In this kind of environment even things that are frightening for an improviser can become possibilities, for example, Charlotte expresses a fear of dancing but, during the Improvathon a scene called for it:

> The instinctive part of me went "Oh my God! This is so terrifying because I hate dancing" and the other part of me was just like "Cariad is going to do this and I'm going to do it with her and that's brilliant. Oh Great!" because it was being forced out of my comfort zone but with someone I totally trusted. I've done physical scenes like that with both of you before and it is like being divided between ignoring the terror which actually you know is genuine and feeling the fear and doing it anyway.

The technique Johnstone teaches that removes fear is the idea to 'fail happily'. If the idea of failure causes fear yet failure cannot be avoided then a change of attitude towards failure will remove the fear associated with it. Egos then do not need to be protected from failure and can step out of the way and allow the improvisers to commit to playing with each other. Patti recognises the need for the concept of 'failing happily' to be embedded in the training:

> If teachers teach improvisation in a mechanical style that is a repetitious and academic, ego-based then we generate high achieving (perhaps) performers of impro games. But we do not inspire free thinking improvisation artists who challenge and explore. Improvisation is non-mechanical, it is organic and impulsive.
>
> ("Robotic Impro", 29/09/10).

Teaching improvisers to make their partners look good rather than focussing on protecting themselves and their own egos is Patti's solution to robotic, ego-driven impro (The Abandoneers, 5/10/10). The problem she has identified lies in the fact that:

> [Practitioners] can believe on an intellectual and practical level in the philosophy and still give in to the human need for validation which creates an aspiration to win [or not to fail]. This craving validation gets in the way of true improvisation work because at the core you are performing at a level of self-need [...] to satisfy our self and ego we will begin to make safe choices. We plan, protect, choose what we excel at, self-sensor [sic] and disconnect from our partners and the spontaneous moment. [The improviser] is not making her partner look good, because she is focused on making herself look good.
>
> ("Competition Fallacy" 2/11/10)

This ego protectionist approach to impro prevents the opportunity to experience the playfulness of co-creation. Listening to the negative and judgemental thoughts coming from the ego stops an improviser from being able to fail happily because they are too scared to take the risk of really existing in the present. They are too busy planning to protect themselves from failure. As Patti says:

> If we give our thoughts and ideas too much power, ego builds. If we have a great line, a clever gag, a funny blow line and we treat our idea with too much preciousness then we begin to form our identity (ego) as an improviser on the ability to have these ideas. Once ego is at play in improvisation the spirit of true impulse and generosity is gone.
>
> ("Impro & Yoga", 4/02/11)

Patti reflects on some of the self-criticisms she is aware of in herself:

> It's obvious [this self-criticism] came from fear. My fear of not understanding, not being able to do it, not getting it right, not being good. In short my intense fear of failing. For someone who has worked along [sic] time now in embracing failure and teaching people to fail happily, it was a great wake up call.
>
> ("When the Teacher Becomes the Student", 16/03/11)

Later she adds; 'in scenes people block out of fear of others having control and out of losing control' ("So an Improviser and a Rabbi", 22/06/11). Essentially, if improvisers are prepared to fail happily and give their partner a good time whilst being willing to relinquish control from their own egos to the complicity of the group then the potential for experiencing playfulness can occur. Lucy goes one step further, equating this playfulness with something even more profound:

> When you're doing a show that is really in tune with everyone in the cast with everyone in the audience and with the Gods it kind of/ you don't really remember it you're just like a chan- no a funnel, no a vessel. You're like a vessel for creativity and it's really a spooky feeling.

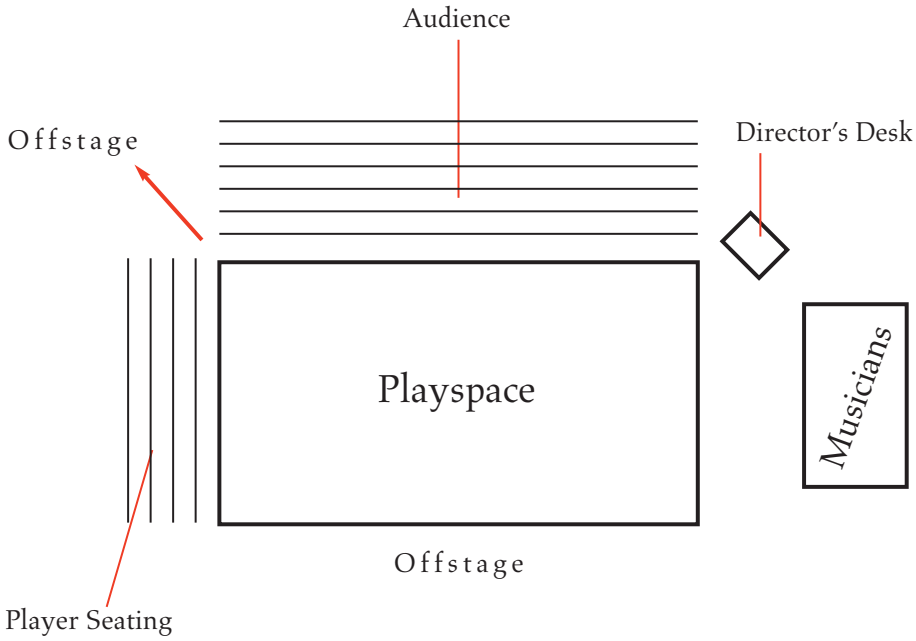
Mary Scruggs, author of *Process: An Improvisers Journey* expresses it thus; 'when I manage to exist in the present moment and the present moment only, I feel like I've brushed up against something eternal. I've touched the divine' (Scruggs, 2008, 42). All these improvisers are identifying some mystical quality that is created in the unique and marginal space/time of impro that occurs through a combination of playful co-creation. In my experience and the experience of some of the interviewees this occurs especially during the unique play space/time of the Improvathon.

I was given an eight-hour shift in the Thirty-hour Improvathon at the Bristol Old Vic (2010), directed by Adam Megiddo, though I elected to stay and watch and experience the whole thirty hours. It was important to be in the pre-liminal state that Turner describes: being with those that were already on stage through watching but not yet performing with them. I would still be invited to join in with the 'circle of love' every two hours; the time between episodes where the whole cast and crew come together backstage to sing the theme tune and make a point of looking into everyone's eyes. Again this was part of the pre-liminal state. At the point that my character was called to join the narrative I felt as if I crossed over into the liminal space, joining those already there. Whilst not actually ritualised per se, I experienced the pre-joining, pre-liminal, waiting-room state as profoundly different to the crossed-over, the threshold state. I felt the attitude of those around me change as I went from initiate to initiated. It felt like being accepted into a tribe that I felt slightly outside of before. Becoming part of the performing group allowed me access to the communal, liminal space/time of playful co-creation (summarised from my journal).

Advance preparation for the Improvathon is minimal. My character for this Bristol Improvathon, set in 1920s gangster America, was Amelia Aircraft. I prepared a costume of a flying suit, hat, goggles, leather jacket and scarf. I had endowed my character with the barest of facts in advance: An explorer, pilot and adventurer arriving back from South America to raise funds for her next expedition. It was important to give the character a goal, or aim in order to seed a strong story. My character was a female pioneer in the early days of flight based around a pun on the name of the famous aviatrix, Amelia Earhart, and the fact that I wanted to add variety to the pool of female characters so that there would not be too many showgirls or molls which were the obvious choices for the period. Also, I surmised that, if I was not going to be in the story for that long (ten hours out of thirty) it would be better to play a somewhat cartoonised character with a strong 'want' and a fairly obvious potential story arc, so that she could come and go without leaving loose ends of story. It is easier for the stronger, more experienced and long-term players to play characters with complicated emotional wants and needs, as they have more time to develop them and better skills with which to do so. Megiddo set up the first scene so that Amelia would meet a character that had been around since the beginning, Shirty Booster, an English gent who had come to America and the Easyspeak Speakeasy to start a movie career but end up starring in erotic films and losing all his money to a con artist. When Amelia takes him up in her plane, she confides to him that she needs to get back to South America because she has a treasure map and wants to find the gold. They crash land in the jungle and meet tribes, witch doctors, baboons and find the treasure. They return back to Easyville, rich as Croesus, in love and Amelia pregnant; but all is not perfect, as when Amelia reluctantly hangs up her flying gear to become a wife and mother, she still harbours her

desire for adventure. Struggling with motherhood and the easy life they now have, she abandons Shirty and their daughter, Poppy Aircraft-Booster (this was my exit from the Improvathon after my shift ended). A little later Shirty is shot by the Don. Baby Poppy is discovered in the street by the newly wed couple, Father Michael (aka God) and Tequila Mockingbird, and will be brought up by them. This was my story arc and it felt important, perhaps only to my ego, that my character's presence left more for the remaining cast to play with in the remaining hours, i.e. a bereft husband and an orphaned child. When the cast picked up these loose ends and played with them it felt as if my involvement in the playful co-creation was being honoured. It is important to note that, as the Improvathon is episodic and in a 'soap opera' style, this was just one of the many intertwining story-lines that appeared during the thirty hours for thirty different characters.

I felt as if, prior to doing my shift, I was outside or on the edges, the periphery of the community. Indeed, the physical space of the Improvathon on Bristol created a threshold space whereby as I moved from audience to player and back again I moved into the playspace (see Figure Three). After doing my shift I felt accepted and that people looked at me differently as if I had 'earned my stripes'. I would never just be an audience member again as the event where I became the mother of the boy in the school play shows (see page 154). Even at the very end of the whole Improvathon I was invited into the celebrational dance where all the players take to the playspace again to be acknowledged and acknowledge each other.



The Bristol Old Vic Paintshop

Figure Three: The Bristol Old Vic Paintshop; Venue for the 2010 Improvathon

I not only completed my shift, but I performed successfully by being helpful and doing my job as an improviser. I fitted into the machinery of the world and I left the stage at the right time and in the right way. I was not afraid for my character to leave the often 'sticky'[21] stage or playspace;. In the Improvathon it was vital that I 'fell on my sword' for the good of the narrative. The acceptance into the community extends beyond the actual finite space and time of the Improvathon itself. I am now a member of the Improvathon community and am invited to come and play in Liverpool at their Improvathon each year. The playspace in Liverpool is similar to the Bristol playspace in that it is not a traditional proscenium arch theatre space. In fact, Liverpool is more towards a space that is 'in the round' (see Figure Four). The players who are not performing in the particular scene that is being played sit on two sides and the

[21] here, 'sticky' refers to the notion that performers crave to stay in the scene/play/ performance even when they have outlived their usefulness for the story which occurs due to ego and not listening to the needs of the communal co-creation and playfulness.

audience sit to the front of the space. The other players perform a doubling function both as also observers, like the audience, and are ready at a moment's notice to jump into any scene that requires them to.

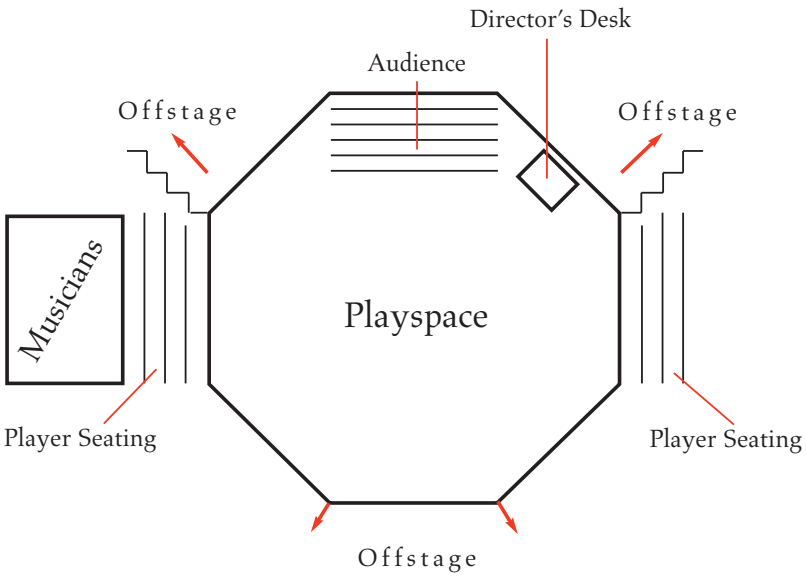


Figure Four: The Kazimier: Playspace of the Liverpool Improvathon 2011

To date I have only been able to do two Improvathons, Bristol 2010 and Liverpool 2011, due to family commitments; but each year there is an Improvathon event in these two locations plus a London Improvathon. These events have built a dedicated community of players and created a sense of communality around the build up to the event, during and afterwards. Audiences have, thus far, been small, but an audience community is also building with each successive event. The impending (at the time of writing) London Improvathon has garnered the most press preview coverage of any Improvathon to date in major newspapers and listings magazines (www.improvathon.co.uk, 2013).

It is clear from the data that impro is treasured by the practitioners due to the pleasure of playing. It is also clear that the disintegration of the ego, or de-individuation, is something that these players also treasure and is necessary for pleasurable playing. Fear of this de-

individuation prevents playful co-creation. Playful co-creation is possible in the communal folk 'body of the people' that Bakhtin has identified. This is further supported by Bakhtin when he states: 'Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter [...] Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world' (Bakhtin, 1984, 47). Yet Turner would assert that the liminal ergic-ludic comes about as a result of acting within a specific set of cultural rules that create the 'social drama'. So is this complete liberty? The rules of impro are quite simple and create the framework within which to play. They are not constructed around social norms. They are: give your partner a good time, yes-and and do not self-censor. Yet, as we have seen, the dominant social rules or norms still manifest during impro so the female subject, for example, still has to battle for a freedom of expression. So Bakhtin's idealised fearless world is difficult to find played out on the impro stage as Deborah discovered. Perhaps this is because 'give your partner a good time' and 'do not self-censor' are rules that are at odds with each other. Deborah's stage partner was not self-censoring but he was not giving Deborah a good time onstage. Is it possible to do both at the same time in the moment of playful co-creation? The techniques of yes-anding and making your partner look good, paradoxically, mean that there is no wrong in impro and so you can be free to fail happily. This is a playful approach to performing is in opposition to there being a 'right' way to action pre-determined performance at the ephemeral point of performing lines or choreography.

6.5 Communality

Here I want to enquire as to whether impro creates communality or whether those that are driven to practise impro already value communality and bring that quality to bear on the practice? Or are elements of both at play? In my self-interview I identify childhood memories of celebratory communal family times; 'at family Christmases and gatherings we would play some of the games [from *Whose Line is it Anyway?*]'. Ruth and Lucy and Pippa identify aspects of childhood that may have made them more likely to search out the communal aspects of impro. Ruth remembers being very embarrassed by parents that would talk to everybody: 'they have this amazing ability to get upgraded to first class [...] because they've been present to the lady at the desk [...] I guess I've lived a very 'yes-and' life because of them'. Lucy also traces it back to her family 'my parents were always the ones that would have the New Year's Eve party, always the ones that looked after other peoples' kids and took them on holiday and had lodgers [...] It makes me open to things'.

However, all of the interviewees express the benefits of communality through performing and playing together in their respective impro groups. Cariad puts part of the success of The Institute as being due to it being 'a nice, free training of friends'. Deborah

mentions interviewing David Fenton about the formation of the Australian Theatresports scene that began her love of impro 'he said it was just a community of people who all got behind it at the right age and everyone was a student of some sort or another and there was just a real thrill in this'. Jana speaks of the development of communities of improvisers as companies and the effect that the communalising process has on the work 'there's a maturity that starts to happen with a company that is working together, that you get bolder at being able to tell really full stories. Whereas when you start improvising [...] it errs towards the silly and the vulgar and that kind of stuff because you're suddenly free so that part of your brain is pouring out of you [...] You need to reveal so much of yourself and that is quite scary when you first start doing [impro]'. The communal working together, performing together actually helps to remove the fear and enable the company to take more risks as they de-individuate from their individual selves. Playing together engenders communitas. The more they reveal of themselves, the more risks they take as a group, the more communal they become, as can be seen in Cariad, Gemma and Charlotte's experiences at The Institute. Jana, Deborah and Philippa also discovered this aspect through long term working together. Jana speaks of doing potentially challenging scenes, such as intimate love scenes, with members of the company: 'You knew that you were connected to that person because you had to be, in the story, so it was free, you were both free to play that part of yourself openly in front of people and I just loved that'. It is clear from the interviews that creating a safe communal space/time enables performers to freely play with their identities and characters. The creation of communal feelings within a group and the building of complicity creates a safe space to be able to take identity risks. Deborah identifies some of the principles of impro as enabling this process:

> I think the struggle with us all to be improvisers is a bit like: if in life you are a bit timid, you'll be a bit timid on the stage and you need to be bold. If in life you're a bit controlling you need to be more fluid. I guess it's just so much about being in the moment and trust your obvious and trust your partner's obvious and all the other stuff will come.

Ruth speaks of the community that created Showstopper:

> There was something about the group that met. There was some kind of weird, I don't know how, you can't teach it, but it was just a chemistry that happened. I think there is definitely a connection between us that you can't teach, you can't make it up, you can't fake it. It's just a thing that happened. Part of the thing that happened is that we all loved the project pretty much from the get go.

Lucy puts it down to something altogether more mystical and magical when she says 'I don't think we did meet. I think we were put together by impro gods'. She goes on to include the audience within this communal feeling:

> Some guy after our Bath gig came up to us and said "this is the definition of creativity what you've just done tonight" [...] Generally, that loving feeling of taking what the audience want us to do at that moment accepting it and building on it.

and Ruth goes on to state: 'it's communion'. Lucy agrees: 'it's like a religion I think because everyone needs that communion in their life'. Pippa continues: 'you sound like a religious nut; "Oh it's really great because we all get along and sometimes we just know what each other is thinking"'. Ruth concludes: 'like being in some kind of weird cult'. She goes on to cite an experience of a particular Showstopper performance at the Edinburgh Festival:

> The six of us that were there for some reason in that week just understood each other. There was no discussion like literally no discussion backstage. Like sometimes backstage we'll be going: "what was your [character's name]?" But there was none of that. There was nothing and it was like an evangelical experience. You got on stage, everyone knew where everyone else was going; there was no bumping into each other. It was like some kind of amazing... and you came off just going… and the audience got it as well! You know our first show they were on their feet before we'd even started. I mean it was bizarre. There was something magic; there is something magical about it and when it works; when it's like that there is nothing that can beat it. And you do walk around like a complete [inaudible] and you're a complete lunatic about it and you're so obsessed with it. I would say it is an obsession.

What Ruth identifies here is the fact that the audience can experience some of that communality as well as the performers and she attempts to articulate the intensity of the experience with religious imagery. Charlotte agrees: 'when I improvised recently that was a joy to see just because actually we were all clearly having a ball; the audience were having a ball and it was such fun to watch. That was, again, very like: Ah, a child watching'. Lucy considers why this might be:

> I was just thinking a little bit more about the audience because, you know, impro is by its very nature improvised and, therefore, people come back because they're there to see the people and to be part of that experience. It becomes like a club for people and I was just thinking of that because last night some people, who came to see one of our gigs we had done in Hemel Hempstead, had driven to Oxford to see us again. They were amazed to see how different it was and so we're reaching out to more and more people on this tour that we're doing and I think that's a really special thing to go around gathering like-minded people and you know some people might see it and go "yeah I never need to see that again" but other people feel a sense of belonging to it. It's that communal thing again.

Ruth summarises: '[impro is] not a means to an end. It is what it is and it is a wonderful communion and a wonderful thing to do'.

It is possible that communality is created through lengthy working relationships within groups of improvisers an dthrough playing togther; co-creating in the moment. It is also

possible that the extended time period of the Improvathon fast tracks the generation of communitas. This is in part due to its ritualised aspects as Turner would recognise. The Improvathon has an exclusive 'club' type sense between the players as they have all endured a journey together in a ritualised way. They are the initiated. It seems that this can, at least in the case of *Showstopper*, transfer somewhat to the audience as well. The audience are in some way implicated in the end result of the Showstopper performance as they are asked for suggestions at the top of the show. This could be seen as a ritual that engenders communitas and creates a 'following'. This breaking down of the fourth wall; the slight collapsing of the gap between audience and performer helps the audience to feel more invested in the performance. Johnstone spoke of his desire for this after witnessing the working-class audiences of wrestling as compared to the middle-class audience of the 'theatre of taxidermy' that he bemoaned. It seems that he acheived this audience investment through his form of impro. This accords with Bakhtin's carnival where everyone is a player and the metaphorical delineating trope of the footlight is dissolved.

6.6 Summary

I have analysed the data set of interviews, journal, self interview, blog and chapter using methods derived from grounded theory. I have gathered a set of data full of anecdotes and experiences of practising female improvisers. I have used grounded theory methods to firstly, openly code (see Appendix Four), then create memos (see Appendix Five) and then relate and group themes (see Appendix Six) for these interviews looking for overarching themes that would support my inkling that the practice of impro has a unique fingerprint of marginality and playful, communal co-creation. These memo statements have formed the basis for the writing up of this chapter. This fingerprint of impro I have theorised in Chapter One as Liminal Ludic Communitas. The report on the data analysis has revealed support from the data set for this theory revealing themes in the interviews of impro's marginal status in relation to the western theatrical tradition. This marginality ranged between: the lack of economical reward, lack of understanding and recognition by those with limited or no experience of watching or participating in impro and, the marginality of the practice itself. In that a particular space and time of 'nowness' is generated when performing improvised work that is different from other forms of performance where the outcomes are decided and determined in advance. It was clear, too, that the place of women within impro is a marginal one, reflecting the social position of women within the dominant culture. Another overarching theme was the notion of playfulness in impro and paradoxically how this playfulness can be prevented or halted through ego defence. Playfulness is also curtailed through an individual player's fear of allowing uncensored activity to be presented on the improvised stage. The experience of this playfulness, or playful co-creation has meant that the practice of impro for all of the

interviewees has had a profound impact and this impact can best be expressed through the final overarching theme that was identified, that of communality. This was a powerful theme that emerged from the data that transcended into feelings akin to religious or spiritual experiences for the interviewees.

In the next chapter I will bring together all the strands of the thesis in order to summarise the research and propose an answer or summary to the research question and concerns articulated in Chapter One. I will assess and evaluate the relative successes and shortcomings of the research project as well as briefly express connecting and intersecting avenues that have not been ventured down due to the constraints of this document but that interest me greatly as an academic.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The aim of the thesis has been to conduct original research that explores, critiques and reflects upon the extent to which the practice of impro can disrupt the dominant order as a marginal, subversive practice of subjugated knowledges in the Foucauldian manner. I have developed the phrase 'liminal ludic communitas' to critically explore the nature of the feelings of well-being created when people improvise. This phrase has been developed from Turner and Bakhtin's notions of liminality, the ludic, communitas and the carnivalesque to describe playing together at the thresholds. I have chosen to focus on Johnstone's impro tradition and technique of storytelling and co-creation of theatre, performed in the moment and then thrown away using, at its foundation, the principle of accepting the offers of other improvisers and building upon them to create scenes, or 'yes-anding'. I have also included Campbell's imported form, the Improvathon, as it is a unique time and space of impro that all but two of the interviewees, plus myself, have experienced.[22]

In order to achieve this aim, I have used a methodology of action research, phenomenology and grounded theory. I have collected stories and conversations about the experience of impro from eleven women, including myself and I have also drawn from a key chapter in a book that is an oral history of Theatresports, Johnstone's format. I have analysed these stories using methods of coding and memoing the data to draw out the overarching themes that these women share in their lived experiences. I have developed these themes, with the help of Turner's theories of theatre and Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, into the phrase 'liminal ludic communitas'. This phrase is the result of the grounded theory research inspired by my initial notion that the practice of the specific forms of impro and the Improvathon has attributes that engender a sense of well-being in its participants. I have shown that this is because the experience of these improvisatory practices, to some extent, subverts the western, heteropatriarchal dominant order. The dominant order has been formed through historical processes that have privileged individuation and the subjugation of meaningfully communal, playful and non-productive activities through the reification of production and consumption. However, the content that emerges during this playful co-creation in the moment that characterises impro can merely reflect the hierarchical gender binary and other norms that dominate the heteropatriarchy. Due to its spontaneous nature, impro tends to reflect rather than subvert power structures in its emergent content. This tendency is less apparent in the Improvathon as its durational form allows for more consideration in the development of characters and situations that can therefore be more playfully subversive in their presentation.

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[22] Patti Stiles has experienced the Improvathon but had not discussed it in her blog at the time I entered it into the data set.

I have chosen to source the data from women improvisers, as I have understood that the position of women in a patriarchal society is still contested and marginal and, therefore, woman is a category that contains forms of subjugated knowledge. The exploration of the feminist literature supports this, as the theorists I have looked at are still searching for a way to express the feminine, and especially the female performer, as equal to the patriarchal hegemony. I found that Mulvey's theories of the male gaze are inadequate to express the complexity and multiplicity of types of gaze that exist. Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity is too fragmented to account for the real lived experience of female identity and results in a fracturing. Ettinger's Matrixial Borderspace is in danger of simply replacing a patriarchal hegemony with a matriarchal hegemony and Butler's fixed and fluid gender fails to account for the potentially limiting experience of biological gender women encounter – in motherhood, for example. I had hoped to find a container for Braidotti's rhizomic protuberances in Haraway's cyborg but found that the machination of biological identity and lived experience is too frightening a future to contemplate and does not account for the messiness of fleshy reality. The cyborg is too classical a body that, whilst being grotesque, is not the carnivalesque, folk grotesque that lived reality embraces. In the end I found that Spivak's strategies of essentialism allowed for both individual lived experience and the experience of finding identifying tropes that connect individuals, to allow for communal pleasures and identities. This potential for de-individuation enables a communal play space and time that coheres, rather than fragments and isolates, lived experiences. The review of the literature around impro, Turner's theories on theatre, Bakhtin's carnivalesque and the particularities of female lived experience and the female performer led me to ask the following questions:

> Is there a connection between woman as 'other' and impro as 'almost-theatre'? Does this play out in the female experience of impro? Does impro as 'other' of theatre hold a potency for subversion in the same way that woman as 'other' has subverted the patriarchy? Or does impro merely mirror the power structures of the wider theatrical and cultural context?
>
> (see page 9)

7.2 Woman as Other

My proposal that impro is 'other' just as woman is 'other' can be supported through an understanding of the female experience of impro and especially her sometimes marginalised and troubled or troubling position on the impro stage. One example of this is Deborah's experience of being bullied, dominated and subjugated on stage by a group of improvising men who utilise various techniques to humiliate and control her under the guise of playful impro. Another example is my own experience of improvising with men. This has been an experience of offers being ignored, or not 'yes-anded', and characters being subjugated or forced into playing a decorative role in male dominated scenes. There is also the example from my training of being taught not to play cross gender in a mixed group. Some of the other interviewees have found that when they make the offer that they are playing a male character in a scene they have tended to have their performed maleness 'stripped off them'. This occurs when the other

players have not been able to see past their biological gender identity to something more ambiguously playful. These points lead me to see that women have experienced being marginalised in impro as subjugated knowers. The position of woman on the impro stage, as evidenced in the data analysis, is a troublesome one because it means that my thesis that impro is a subversive form is put to question by the lack of freedom to form alternative identities for the female subjugated knower in the impro context.

7.3 Impro as 'Almost-theatre'

Guay defines impro as 'Almost-Theatre' or as 'other' to scripted or pre-devised theatre. The feminist theorists engaged here are in agreement that woman is still defined as 'other' to the dominant trope of the male. I propose that this microcosm is reflected in the macrocosm of impro's relationship to mainstream theatre in the UK where it is less visible, less economically viable, garners smaller audiences and is misunderstood, or only understood through the presence of an old comedy television programme. Impro is also not economically viable in the UK performance context. I can extrapolate from this that impro is also a subjugated knowledge in relation to dominant performance forms and that it can be placed in a marginal position to the dominant centre. The question is does this make impro a subversive activity? Perhaps the activity of a subjugated group (women) within a subjugated theatre practice (impro) is a strategy of resistance. If the female improviser can find her voice and fluidity of identity within this marginalised practice then perhaps she has conquered her internalised panopticon against the odds. Or, perhaps, in the right contexts, impro is a fertile practice arena for attempting fluid identities.

7.4 Impro - Subversive or Collusive

One problem I have found whilst researching impro is that the content of performance that is co-created in the moment often crudely reflects identities and positions in society of fixed identity that is culturally constructed. The characters and situations created without the 'benefit' of carefully constructed creation in advance of the performance are skimmed from the surface of the mind. Johnstone says 'trust your obvious' and so when improvisers present 'top of the mind' characters and situations these are often beset with cliché and stereotype of the crudest kind. This is of questionable subversive value. But this does accord with Bakhtin's carnival space and time where inversion is akin to subversion and also accords with Turner's notion that revealing the status quo whilst not critiquing it can also be subversive by its revelatory nature. If a mirror is held up to the players and audience and they recognise behaviours and identities in these performed cartoons, they may have the opportunity to subvert them once they are drawn to their attention. Does the performance maker need to apply a Brechtian didactic technique to make work that subverts the status quo or are there alternatives?

My assertion is that, in fact, the form of impro, if not the resulting content, is subversive in its marginal position to the dominant order. The very act of co-creating a performance in the space and time of now is at odds with the norms of production, those of authorship, product and artefact. The production of culture in the dominant trope is not as ephemeral, disposable or 'throwaway' to the extent that impro is. Even if it is designed not to last, especially in the digital age, some artefact will remain to be packaged, owned, copyrighted and profited from. Impro resists that. It is form means that it will tend to leave no trace. Of course it can be recorded and indeed television programmes created from it but it is not intended for those purposes and in those circumstances editorial controls are imposed upon the product before it is deemed suitable for broadcast. It is intended, in its purest form, to be created and performed, produced and consumed *at the same time*. It seems to me that this is so at odds with the dominant order of production and consumption that it brings into perspective the dominance of the western patriarchal hegemony's desire to control and dominate and is, therefore, a subversive act, an example of the margin resisting the centre. Impro is an oral culture, as McGill asserts in her study of orality, women, improvisation and *Commedia Dell'Arte*. Orality is subjugated by literacy in this age of the dominance of repeatable productivity and consumption. Does this necessarily make impro liminal though? Certainly, its content is liminal because it is also social drama which, in Turner's definition, reflects and reveals rather than subverting in order to affect seismic social change. Perhaps impro uses strategic essentialism to reveal what subjugated knowers know – that, despite apparent freedom and equality for many subjugated groups, these groups are still subjugated in a variety of ways.

7.5 Liminal Impro

I propose that the present – now – is a liminal space and time, as we can see from Turner's theories that have been articulated in Chapter Two. The space and time of the act of impro, theatre created in the present, is, therefore, liminal as opposed to other cultural forms that Turner identifies as liminoid. As was shown in Chapter Two, Broadhurst asserts that liminal performance can be recognised through its self-reflexivity. Impro epitomises this quality. There is no attempt to hide the mechanisms by which impro is being produced. This is exemplified in practice by the presence of a vocal director; the appropriation of audience suggestions; the self-referential use of light and sound when the technician is also called upon to improvise, sometimes ironically commenting on the stage action; and the improvisers' stepping outside of the action to comment upon it, and drawing attention to their processes and/or abilities. The fourth wall is continually broken in improvised performance. There is no attempt to disguise the "play" as reality like there is in dramatic realism. In the impro formats, direction, lighting decisions, musical decisions, 'mistakes' and adoption of character are not seamless and hidden as they are in a theatre of naturalism (Brecht utilised the exposure of artifice in his theatre as well, though with a priori determination rather than in the moment). So Broadhurst identifies

this as a liminal feature when she states that in the liminal, strategies of 'questioning, self-refle(ction), its formation processes are not hidden but foregrounded' (Broadhurst, 1999, 5).

Broadhurst also claims that one of the central objectives of liminal performance is 'to merge art with everyday life' (Broadhurst, 1999, 5). The lack of pre-meditation, preconception or design that is inherent to improvised performance means that inevitably the "everyday" is reflected in the content and concerns of scenes. This content can also happily sit side by side with the fantastical, the grotesque and the impossible, as scenes evoke space adventures, monster encounters or even time-travelling meerkats. The only limits are the imaginations of the performers. Impro makes "art" an everyday activity, reminding participants of the prosaic nature of imagination and "genius", permanently collapsing the distinction between art and everyday life. The co-createdness of impro that flattens the status distinctions between performer, director, musician, light and sound technicians and eliminates the author altogether, also helps to collapse the notion of high art into the everyday. Impro also accords with the parallel Broadhurst draws between the liminal and the "delegitimisation of authorial authority" (Broadhurst, 1999, 6) when she talks about techniques of sampling and cut-ups in music and literature. Impro explores the notion of sampling through its use of the pastiche of established genre. In the Improvathon, for example, scenes can be called in the style of Brecht, Sondheim, The Three Little Piggies, A School Nativity Play and many endless possibilities of others. These genres are suggested by the director at the top of a scene but s/he then relinquishes control as the improvisers take the suggestion and collaboratively co-create the scene. Everyone and no one is in control as the material emerges in a communal act of becoming.

The playful and instantaneous co-creation of impro aligns with Broadhurst's definitions of liminal performance especially when she sites liminal as performing at the edge of the possible (Broadhurst, 1999, 168) and evoking the sublime (Broadhurst, 1999, 171). This accords with the practice of the Improvathon as an extreme of what is actually theatrically possible and the feelings evoked by the interviewees when they use religious and spiritual terminology to articulate what it is about practicing impro that affects them so profoundly. Broadhurst also identifies a key factor of the liminal as the emancipation from traditional structures of authorship and direction in performance (Broadhurst, 1999, 172). Again, impro accords with this. The players co-create alongside the director (in the Improvathon), audience suggestions change the dynamic between passive audience and active performer (in short-form) and authorship is communal and emergent. The very immediacy of impro removes the mediating possibilities of other methods of theatre-making such as scriptwriting, devising or choreography. The fact that the material for impro is performed as it is created with no

possibility for editing or re-drafting (although directors can call for a 're-write' and some games call for a re-run of a scene in a different style or genre, for example) means that 'truth' *becomes* on the stage and things are revealed as they are. The material itself may not challenge or question status quos (although it might) but the very mechanism of producing theatre through the process of improvising disrupts the theatrical canon. Excess is also in evidence. Take for example Bratt's telling of the Showstopper performance where her character was 'raped' by the rest of the cast who were playing robot transformers. Material of this kind would rarely, if ever, filter through to a pre-made theatre performance. In impro if that is what happens then that is the performance.

This notion of an indirect effect on the political is crucial to the liminal and an understanding of the liminal nature of impro. It is quite possible to dismiss impro as a theatrical activity that supports the heteropatriarchal dominant order due to the often unchallenging nature of the content of impro. The tendency with improvised material is to recreate the traditional gender identities and roles that support the heteropatriarchal order of things. Conversely, the impro play space and time (especially the durational form of the Improvathon) can also be an opportunity to performatively play out fantasies that a player cannot enact in real life because of the self-policing of identity. An example of this is when the character that I played in the Bristol Improvathon abandoned her family for a life of excitement and adventure subverting the idealised mother subject, a subjectivity that I am experiencing in my lived reality. It may be, though, that the subversive potential of impro is even present when the content recreates dominant identities. This reproduction of dominant identities, in performances which are created in the moment in front of the audience, serves to underline the fact of the dominance of these identities. Thereby revealing to the audience and the players a reflection of the status quo. This revelation is itself a subversive act, though it may have no power to change attitudes or behaviour. In a similar way, once the carnival is over the status quo reasserts itself, but the participants have, nonetheless, experienced something 'other'.

7.6 Ludic Impro

It is possible to articulate a comparison between naturalistic theatre and improvised performance with its self-reflexive revelation of the mechanisms of theatrical performance that are more usually hidden in naturalistic theatre. This playful doubling or slipping in an out of focus is a self-reflexivity that occurs spontaneously in improvised performance especially in the durational episodic form of the Improvathon. The more tired the players become, the more reality and character slippage occurs, to comedic and dramatic effect, revealing a ludic and carnivalesque slippage between the identities of the player and their character. At the Bristol

2010 Improvathon Ruth had chosen to wear a very short dress for her character of Alice Capone, head female gangster. Her character was very high status and Ruth herself in this situation, being a veteran improviser and improvathoneer, was inhabiting a high status identity off-stage as well. In reality, Ruth admitted, she would never wear a skirt that short. Her fellow cast members expressed delight at the niceness of the legs on display and at the beginning of each new episode where the characters re-introduce themselves, her character entered the play space to a chorus of wolf whistles and cries of 'nice legs' and 'hot, hot, hot' from the rest of the cast. Ruth's character would often sit on a high stool and Ruth/Alice developed, through the duration, a bit of business to do with futilely pulling the skirt down and sitting carefully and precariously on this stool during her scenes. This became a comedic motif and was an example of the doubling between high status character and player and self-consciousness about an unaccustomed revelation of a body part all mixed up in the Ruth/Alice on and offstage personas. Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity and rhizomic becoming is played out here. Rather than a Stanislavskian or Strasburgian "method" technique of becoming the character through identification, in the Improvathon the character and the player slip in and out of focus remaining distinct from each other but also able to reflect and comment upon each other through action and word. This becomes more and more apparent the tireder and more 'spaced-out' the players become through lack of sleep. Towards the end of the Bristol 2010 Improvathon another player (not one of the interviewees), Sarah-Louise Young – playing the character of Flimsy Premise, was involved in a game of Russian Roulette. It became clear that Young was either not well versed in the rules of the game or was too tired to remember at that point. The narrative required that the characters played this scene through to a, potentially bloody, end, but Young/Premise was so unclear by this point what was reality and what was theatre, that she kept stopping the other characters in the scene from holding the gun to their heads and pulling the trigger. The audience were yelling for them to play, dying to find out what the denouement to the love triangle story line would be. But Young the player kept appearing onstage as opposed to Premise the character to stop the action as, in such a tired state, she had confused the playful space with reality. The result was a charming and exciting scene where the performed jeopardy of the Russian Roulette was heightened by the real jeopardy of the satisfactory completion of the game of the scene.

The ludic characterisations available in impro are experienced as liberating for the interviewees in stark opposition to the restrictions placed upon (mostly) female actors in the mainstream industry. This is evidenced by Ruth's agent advice that she fell through the gaps of the fixed identity extremes, of ingenue and character actor, available to the female actor. That this does not figure in impro is evidence that, despite the difficulties of playing cross-gender roles, the possibilities for female characters to play are limited by the player's imagination and

skill in performing as well as their self-policing and having their onstage identities endowed by other players. This is at odds with the dominant theatre which places restriction based on physical appearance on both male and female actors.

There is also a sense that impro is, in Turner's terms, ergic-ludic. In order to practise and practise well, performers have to work at it, train for it and participation in the Improvathon means staying awake and attentive, ready to perform at a moment's notice, for days at a time. However, the fact that in women improvisers are discouraged from playing world-upside-down, opposite gender roles is not ludic. That form of playing is disallowed. Again the very 'otherness' of the subject of woman prevents me from declaring impro simply as a subversive practice.

7.7 Communal Impro

Haraway identifies, through her articulation of the cyborg identity that, as humans become more physically isolated from each other through technology, they become more interconnected through cyber networks. In this paradigm, community becomes further commodified as the physical communal space disappears. People join social networks, yet sit at home alone typing into machines to communicate. Improvised performance is an embodied event that is co-created together in a liminal and playful space and time. I propose that the reason that all of the interviewees are so passionate about impro, mourn the loss of that space/time when it is gone (The Institute) and jump at the chance to put themselves through the pain of impro's durational extreme (the Improvathon) is because of the communitas that is generated by playing together at the thresholds, in the liminal space. There are far fewer liminal spaces available to western denizens now, so this chance is rare and for improvisers it is available through the workshop and by performing together.

The connection with ritual that is reflected when the interviewees use phrases such as 'it's like a religion, I think, because everyone needs that communion in their life' (Trodd-Senton, Interview Transcript); 'there is something magical about it' (Bratt, Interview Transcript); 'we talk about impro gods' (Trodd-Senton, Interview Transcript); 'it's like you're channelling something else' (Bratt, Interview Transcript); 'it's like that's my religion' (Lloyd, interview transcript) leads me to this conclusion. There is something happening during the practice of impro that is not quotidian. Some of the interviewees have expressed that they would rather improvise, if it gave them a basic living, rather than do any other kind of acting or comedy work. It is clear then that something numinous is happening when they improvise and especially during the durational form of the Improvathon. This could be variously formulated as impro gods, invoking the divine, being taken by the muses, channelling the gods or Campbell's rhapsodes. The common factor, however this sense is expressed, is this sense of joyful pleasure

generating individual and communal well-being. The interviewees, myself and Patti all refer to this sense in relation to our experiences of impro. I have termed this: Liminal Ludic Communitas, meaning; playing together at the thresholds in the specific space/time of impro.

As I have shown, for Turner, communitas also, potentially, has the effect of enforced normalisation on a social group. This I have certainly experienced in my association with Subud. The early spiritual freedoms spontaneously received by the founder of Subud have been codified and fixed by the members and now constitute a 'safe' dogma for many. Personally, I kick against the traces of this and find myself 'out in the cold' and no longer enjoying a feeling of communitas with my fellow Subud members. In relation to the 'official' Subud I am a protestant. For as Turner states:

> The inherent contradictions between spontaneous communitas and a markedly structured system are so great, however, that any venture which attempts to combine these modalities will constantly be threatened by structural cleavage.
> (Turner, 1982, 50)

I have not experienced this rupture in my practice of the latihan (Subud's spiritual meditation practice, see page 102) nor in my practice of impro. But I have experienced it in the social structures of these two different practices: in Subud through the dogma imposed upon liberated spirituality and in improv through the licensing of formats, the fixing of methods in published books and the veneration of key figures. So it is looking like there is a paradox even here between form and content; the form of impro is both at once communitas and fixed structure, and the content is both at once free and beholden to reflecting existing fixed social structures. The same can be said to be true of both the form of Subud and its content – the latihan. Perhaps the liminal space, or lacuna, of the rupture or 'structural cleavage' is the practice; the actual lived here-and-now-ness of doing both improv and the latihan. This is the playful, ludic liminal space-time where communitas occurs, where it is possible to play together at the margins, subverting the dominant order of things. Or, as Turner posits:

> Communitas […] may be said to exist more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more "liberated" way of being socially human, a way both of being detached from social structure […] and also of a "distanced" or "marginal" person's being more attached to *other* disengaged persons.
> (Turner, 1982, 50-1, emphasis in original)

This sense of contrasting with the dominant, rather than subverting or actively resisting it, is interesting, as it softens the function of the 'other' and is perhaps an application of Spivak's strategic essentialism. So if a group choose to temporarily cohere, this action of cohering as a group is also in itself at odds with the dominant order which seeks opposition and

individuation rather than community. As Turner so eloquently puts it; 'a loving union of the structurally damned pronouncing judgement on normative structure and providing alternative models for structure' (Turner, 1982, 51). However, I would adjust this by exchanging 'alternative' which suggests a replacement with 'complementary' which suggests co-existence.

7.8 The Limitations of the Research

The journey of this research has not been without its issues. Researching any practice that the researcher is also involved in is problematic, in that the researcher's relationship to the research is constantly changing perspective due to the hermeneutic spiral of action research. It has been very difficult to contain the research parameters and prevent them from spilling out in all sorts of interesting directions like the flesh of the burlesque performer. Impro, though seemingly clearly defined as a performance genre is, in actuality, a huge field of wildly differing techniques and styles and, of course, different media. My process was, in part, one of discovery through practice. If I had been at a later stage with my practice, this research would have had a very different focus from that of its initiation. For example, at the time of interviews, I had yet to do my first Improvathon. If I had already performed at the Bristol Improvathon, then I would have chosen a different group of women with Improvathon experience (Angie Waller, Helen Foster and Lauren Silver) to replace Deborah, Philippa and Jana and I would have focused the interviews on the lived female experience of the Improvathon rather than impro generally. This would have tightened the thesis focus. Another strand of great interest to me was far too tangential to include here, as it was a fascinating sphere of its own, even though Johnstone devotes an entire section of his original book *Impro* to it, and that is Trance Mask, a masked form of improvisation. A practitioner is free to develop these tangents as necessary and as they arise. A PhD researcher is not.

7.9 Liminal Ludic Communitas

I have conducted an ethnographic research framed within a Foucauldian dialectic of dominance and power that has focused on the lived experience of the practising female improviser as 'other'. This has been developed through utilising a methodology of grounded theory that demonstrates the trajectory of the hermeneutic spiral of action research. The trope of woman as 'other' within the heteropatriarchy has been mapped onto the trope of impro as 'other' to the dominant performance forms of mainstream theatre and comedy. Both of these 'others' have been framed as subjugated knowledges. As a practising female improviser myself, the researcher (and her subjugated knowledge) has also been the subject of the research, both as a practitioner and as a member of the impro community; having been taught by, trained with or performed with most of the interviewees. The research has shown that liminal ludic communitas is a way of describing the feelings of well-being that are generated when

improvisers play together and co-create throwaway performances in the space/time of the present as identified by the interviewees. This engenders a sense of non-productive and playful well-being in the performers that is at odds with the dominant drive to manifest people as separate and productive. Impro, then, radically disrupts the dominant order of things and is, therefore, a marginal and subversive performance form that is a subjugated knowledge. However, the research has also discovered that the content that is revealed during this unplanned, playful co-creation tends to reflect stereotypical identity within the dominant order rather than subvert it. It is questionable then whether or not the practice of impro allows its subjugated knowers (female improvisers) freedom of identity within this marginal form. Ultimately, because of this paradox, impro resists fixed identification because it is both subverting and asserting the dominant order of things at the same time. Liminal ludic communitas – or playing together in the liminal space and time of now, the 'threshold' – is a marginal activity that is not encouraged, let alone reified, by the dominant order because of its potential to radically and permanently disrupt the dominant order. One of the forms of performance practice that manifests as liminal ludic communitas is impro. There may well be many others if we choose to search for them in these threshold times and spaces.

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Appendix One – Research Paper

Impro and Jouissant Communitas Research Centre for the Arts as Well Being, Winchester University, July, 2009.

The inspiration for this practice-led lecture demonstration lies in my experience of training in theatrical improvisation.

During the practice of improvisation I have observed somatically, and discovered in my fellow improvisers through observation and in conversation, feelings and experiences that I have come to understand and categorise as jouissant communitas, leading to enhanced feelings of well-being.

In this practice demonstration I will begin by briefly contextualising the improvisation practice that I do before asking you all to join me in several paired and group games. Afterwards I will examine aspects of the practice of improvisation in relation to jouissant communitas and related theories as well as making a claim for the potential of improvisation as a subversive, resistant practice.

The improvisatory practice I have been working with for just over a year now is methodologically aligned with Keith Johnstone's paradigm for improvisation. A year ago I was lucky enough to attend a workshop with the man himself, funded by the university. Since then I have been doing regular workshops with a London based company who were trained by Patti Stiles, Keith Johnstone's assistant. So my experience of improv is based almost exclusively in the Johnstonian mode. The mode can be briefly summarised as emphasising collaborative storytelling rather than a pressing need to be funny (what we call gagging) and any laughter generated is a happy by-product of the material that emerges from happy improvisers. For Johnstone this notion of the happy improviser comes via relaxed performers who are not trying too hard and have left their fear in the proverbial dressing room. He believes that it is irrational to be frightened of improvising because it is not a life and death activity (note: stand-up comics refer to dying on stage). I will not go into Johnstone's inspiration for his method, other than to recommend his books 'Impro' and 'Impro for Storytellers' and briefly say that he was looking for an antidote to what he was taught at school – that trying hard and struggling were inherent to success. He discovered that the opposite was the case when improvising – i.e. relaxing and letting go.

So briefly – the training teaches us to accept ideas and cede control to the collaborative project rather than force through our own brilliant idea, and give our partner a good time – what will

make them happy? One central method is 'yes-anding'. That is, accepting and building on the idea that is on the table moment by moment (and hopefully reincorporating the previous ideas which helps to end a scene). In impro we have to 'yes and' our partners' and our own ideas in order not to cancel the promises made to the audience at the beginning of a scene. For example, last night I played a lawyer/client scene where I had been imprisoned for driving while using a mobile phone. I revealed to my lawyer that I was pregnant and begged her to swap places with me until I had the baby and then I would come and swap back. The promise made is that we will swap and that I am probably not really pregnant and definitely not coming back, leaving my lawyer to do the time for me.

So now we are going to have a go at a simple but key improv game – word-at-a-time story.

Warm-up – Counting to 21 as a group, eyes closed (creating complicity)

Demo: Word-at-a-time story

Advice:

Eye-contact

Actions/physicalise

Begin with a verb/doing word

Be a 'we' but do everything together (i.e. don't have a conversation between yourselves as two characters.

If you are drifting into lists/gossip/talking about actions outside of the scene (bridging) solve this by saying 'suddenly'

Meet somebody/thing

Ask what they did – précis the story.

What happened when they got into trouble? Did they confront it or run away or defer dealing with it?

Repeat - Enter into the trouble this time

I am proposing that there are at least three theories that I can adopt to show how improvisation practice can create jouissant communitas. Firstly the practice disrupts the panopticon of the dominant symbolic order. Secondly it foregrounds alterity and thirdly it creates a spontaneous dialogic un-product.

Zizek posits that while it may not be possible to annihilate the monologic order of things it is possible to displace it through resistant practices, in this case through moments of impromptu communal creation. Both the inner and outer panopticons are temporarily shelved in improvisation. Inwardly the watcher inside is avoided by improvisation's ability to go down, what Freud terms the royal road to the unconscious but in a different way to the private world of dreams. The collaborative nature of impro seems to lead down the royal road to the Jungian collective unconscious. Unconsciousnesses are in dialogue with and affected by each other and surprising convergences and affinities can emerge.

The external panopticon is challenged through the storytelling. When we don't run away from the encounter with the monster/threat we are exercising our potential for insurrection against the order of things, or are expressing our subjection to the order of things – the monstrous capitalist production machine.

For Levinas the heart of philosophy is not the discrete subject searching for meaning or purpose within the order, but the meaning and purpose found in relation to the other – in alterity. Levinas figures the face-to -face encounter as an ultimate situation that is present in its refusal to be contained. He says 'it obliges me to open myself to it, thereby breaking open my own self-contained identity and my own sense of security and at-homeness'. These senses of unruliness and risk-taking seem to me to be eminently present in the act of improvisation. According to the radical text – *The Coming Insurrection* – threatening the integrity of the self through being in relationship with others is a subversive practice. The anonymous collective authors of the tract implore us not to 'shrink from the political aspect involved in all friendships'. The practice of improvisation promotes inter-relation in a non-productive mode something that has been squeezed out of our relationships with the creeping commodification of aspects of social life. In improvising we are engaged with the act of emergent collaborative creation that has its roots in oral and storytelling traditions.

The Bakhtinian notions of folk, carnival and mulivocality or dialogism have relevance here. Improvisation has the potential to enable us to come into complicit dialogic agency with others – moment by moment. The presence of several unmerged voices in undirected intersection demonstrates the plurality of consciousnesses as opposed to the unity of a system. Bakhtin

might have described this as the unity of a dynamic event and would perhaps see in improvisation his notion of I-for-another and another-for-me in the principle of giving our partner a good time.

In summary, I would like to claim that the act of collaborative improvised storytelling momentarily disrupts the monologic order of things, creating jouissant communitas and is therefore a resistant practice. The nature of improvisation as a radical act of playing with the other creates a dialogic un-product, unreproducable, resisting commodification and insertion into order. Ultimately I guess you just had to there.

Appendix Two – Preliminary Email to Participants and Ethics Contract

Dear_____

I am currently researching a PhD in improvisation at the University of Winchester. As part of this research project I would like to organise to record a conversation between myself and several groups of female improvisers who regularly, either currently or in the past, play together. These informal, conversation-style interviews will happen at a venue near Warwick Avenue tube station in Maida Vale, London (www.amadeuscentre.co.uk) at a time that is convenient to yourself and the others in your group.

As you are the main contact that I have for your group I would ask if you could forward this email to _____ and _____. I will cover any travel costs that you incur in getting to and from the venue and will provide refreshments and a comfortable environment for the conversation/interview which will last approximately two hours.

In my research I am using a methodology of Narrative Inquiry where, what interests me are the stories we tell of our experiences of practising and performing improvisation. I have chosen to focus upon women because I am one and I am curious as to the similarities and differences in our stories of impro. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, and if you are willing to participate, please let me know.

The Research Council requires that researchers draft an ethical contract for research participants that advises them of their rights. The researcher has a duty of care to respect the material that is gathered as part of the research process and the participant continues to have rights over that material. The researcher may only use that material for the stated purposes and needs to draft separate contracts for any other uses (for example publication beyond the PhD itself). I attach this contract for your information and will bring hard copies for you to sign and keep at the meeting.

I very much hope that you want to be involved with this inquiry. If so, please let me know what time periods are better for you, i.e. evenings or weekends, weekdays etc.

Yours,

Amanda Bolt

Ethical Contract for Unstructured Recorded Conversation/Interview with Practitioners of Comedy Improvisation

Please read the following points that cover the ethical issues of the data collection for the research project and sign below to indicate your understanding and agreement;

- I have been informed about the general goals and methods involved in this research project.
- My participation is completely voluntary and I can withdraw at any moment I choose.
- I reserve the right to refuse to answer any specific questions and to discuss any experiences I hold to be private.
- The quotes recorded during the conversation/interview may be used in the final report.
- I understand that my participation includes consent to a conversation/interview of approximately 120 minutes with two of my colleagues.
- I understand that the researcher may correspond via email after the conversation/interview with further questions, within reason, and I have the right to end this further contact.
- I have the right to correspond with the interviewer should further insights, questions or thoughts emerge after the conversation/interview.
- I understand that any such written material may also be used in the research report, but only with my express permission.
- Interviews will only be audio-taped with my permission.
- At the end of the taping I will be able to erase from the record, or correct anything that I have said.
- All audio tapes will be destroyed after they have been transcribed
- I understand that I can ask for information about the project at any time, and that I can have access to the final report.
- The researcher will send me a copy of the finished chapter that includes my quotes so that I can see how they have been used and request changes to anything I am unhappy with.

I hereby agrees to participate in the research project and acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent agreement.

_____ _____

PARTICIPANT'S NAME PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

Additional agreement is required for the following, if left unsigned your presence in the final report will be represented by a pseudonym and no biographical details will be included;

- I am happy for professional and biographical information that is in the public domain (i.e. on the internet, in books or in newspaper/magazine reviews) to be linked to my quotes and identity within the research report.

_____ _____

PARTICIPANT'S NAME PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

_____

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE

Researcher: Amanda Bolt, Research Student, Faculty of Arts, University of Winchester, West Hill, SO22 4NR

Correspondence address: 198 High Street, Rickmansworth, Herts, WD3 1BD, amanda.m.bolt@gmail.com 07786436845

Appendix Three - Unstructured Interview Questions

I wanted to keep the interview fluid and offer prompts for discussion rather than fixed questions that needed an answer so these were prepared in advance with the proviso that other questions would arise and some of these may well be omitted:

- Impro training and background and current practice?
- In what ways have you worked together?
- Why does impro appeal as a performance form?
- What character choices do you make?
- What are your bad impro habits?
- How do you find improvising with men?
- How do you find working in single sex impro?
- How is it being the only girl working with all men?
- Do the different genders have different skills in impro?
- What is your philosophy of impro?

Appendix Four – Coded Interview Extract

and um Ken did his show erm what was it erm Pigeon Hamlet was it? Anyway so er sorry, Pigeon Macbeth anyway it was bizarre. So it meant you were too scared to not do what he said. So er you kind of would he'd say 'she sings a song about Poland' and you'd just try and do your best song because the last thing you'd want is for him to go 'Ah it's fucking shit' you know and he'd do things like say 'I want you to come and do this show at the Barbican' and it was me and Adam and Shawn and it was actually billed as Ken Campbell talking about his life you know for thirty minutes and he hadn't told them that we were actually going to sing so they sort of announced him and the me and Adam started singing and Shawn was doing poems it was the ultimate car crash but he loved it cos he just loved seeing all these people going 'what the fuck's going on?' and it was quite enjoyable in that way. So obviously yeah through that obviously then I was with Adam and Adam was like 'you should do Showstopper'.	Ken Campbell scared into being spontaneous (not being prepared) again, spontaneity and trusting your obvious failing happily mischevious
Lucy: but before all that, before you joined School of Night we were doing School of Night and Ken stuff at the Royal Court part of a fifty year anniversary we improvised in the style of all the Royal Court writers.	School of Night - genre impro, 'in the style of'
Amanda: So you're all very much Ken Campbell people.	
Ruth: Well me less so I only met him through/ 'cause I refused to go to these workshops for so long and then basically I only met him in Edinburgh. I mean he had seen me in Showstopper when we'd done it in London and he came up to me after one show and said 'I like what you do' and then left and I went 'oh right' and I was just a bit like oohh. And he came up to Edinburgh and he did the last week and it was one of his last shows ever and he did this thing were he got reviewers to write a review of a musical that has never happened um like their	ego, encouragement, support reviewers, mainstream hegemonic theatre

perfect musical. Basically he'd get them to write it, we'd all sit onstage with them standing there. They'd read out the review and then we had to do that show and you know its really funny cos a lot of the reviewers are like you know you can tell when they just want to fuck you up and they write these things that were seemingly impossible and we'd just go 'alright then we'll do it' and I have to say those five days with Ken in Edinburgh I learnt more than I've learnt in um ten years

impro subverting mainstream theatre

fail happily

being in the moment

learning the craft of impro

Lucy: Oh he was better than any drama school

Ruth: He was incredible and he just/ I loved him and he just said the rudest things to me and I thought he was brilliant and I said to Adam it was like I met my perfect man but he was thirty years too old and I was just born too late. Cos he was just he was just brilliant he just did things like you would just stand there and the audience would be coming out with stuff and he'd go 'I want and a amazing suggestion' and someone would go 'cheese' and (it was always cheese or Bognor or skegness) and this one guy just kept shouting stuff out and in the end Ken went 'no not you someone with a fucking brain' and I just though that was brilliant.

deep love and appreciation for Campbell

spontaneous and not caring what others think, create a safe space to co-create

subverting the norms of theatre and performance (ettiquette)

Pippa: and he also had things like you know you walk on stage you check for drips in the ceiling and you check for holes in the floor so as soon as you walk on you look up and you look down and you automatically become interesting to an audience. And there was another thing that during a conversation just go and look out of the window but carry on talking about the thing you were talking about but just have a little look out of the window and then come back into the scene and it was just those little things that make you much more interesting and/

techniques for impro practice

creating interest/narrative on stage spontaneously

Lucy: it was brilliant for acting as well you know like where some people would action their script or whatever he would say 'okay do that speech but imagine you've got a carrier bag stuck on your foot and you're trying to get it off' or whatever it was he'd give you a little layer to deepen your…	subverting norms of theatre/ performance
Ruth: and things like 'do this but I want you to cry on one side of your face and laugh on the other' and so you're like pulling weird faces but you are doing something interesting. Or that thing you did where you play the audience's face	subverting the norms of theatre techniques
Pippa: That's what I still do all the time when I'm doing stand-up is I always look every single person in the audience in the eye and just repeat what their face is doing and it really works. It's bizarre.	playful
Lucy: Well they automatically think that there's some kind of connection there that you're creating. Me and Ruth also write together we have a small double act thing [Trodd en Bratt] and we did a gig on Saturday and I looked at a guy on the front row and did his face.	playful and creating connections
Ruth: yeah I did someone's face at the back it's a really useful thing and just loads of things that you can do that he just…the thing that I love is when we do the/ say you're the two spear carriers at the back of the scene.	playing bit parts with interest and creating business
Lucy: Playing extras basically.	
Ruth: yeah playing extras but er you have to eat something surreptitiously because you've been playing this scene for so long and we were doing it/ we did it in a rehearsal once and Shawn and Cariad I think were doing this beautiful scene at the front and me and Lucy were trying to eat a cake at the back and it is the funniest thing cos no one was looking at that but is just adds all these layers. He was a genius for that and so I wish I had I wish I had been a Ken acolyte but I wasn't, but I am in spirit.	adding depth to improvised performances Ken Campbell 'acolyte' - religious language

Amanda: and how my erm I I sort of started through doing a few bits in New York with some guy who was doing real Whose Line is it Anyway style stuff and then got on to the whole Keith Johnstone thing and did a workshop with him. How does I mean have you guys all read Keith's work and how does it relate to Ken's cos I know Ken hasn't written anything has he?

Campbell and Johnstone connection

Lucy: Ken er no he's written loads. He's written loads of plays that have been published.

Amanda: but not on impro
Lucy: he's got tons of notebooks that Sean [McCann] is going through

Amanda: So eventually something will appear

Lucy: yeah definitely. Erm Michael Coveney is writing a book about Ken and Sean is writing up his notebooks cos he's done like tonnes of stuff brilliant gems of stuff

artefacts

Ruth: But there's nothing published about impro at the moment.

Lucy: oh no no no but he did he was a sort of he did read Johnstone

Ruth: I think Johnstone's got …you can't dismiss it by any means

Lucy: he was quite into that Boris game he would make us do that quite a lot.

Campbell using Johnstone techniques

Ruth: what else? Erm I mean I suppose if you look at you know Keith Johnstone is the one that is like the building blocks for everything isn't it. But then I find it difficult to read cos I find it a little bit 'and then I said do said do this and I was right' and I'm always a bit like well okay Keith well done and it is it is brilliant and you can't deny all that but I think its like anything, you take the stuff you need from it but you can't learn everything from that one person's way of doing it

Johnstaone as foundational

eclectic influences on technique rather than one 'guru'

and the more you do it. I mean the theory of it is fine you know there's so much and it's a really intriguing thing and you know we talk about the psychology of impro all the time and about what it means and why only certain people are drawn to it. And I do think there are certain people who are really drawn to it. Amanda: what sort of people would that be.

practice

meaning of impro and who is attracted to practice it

Ruth: well I think a lot of proper loonies. Loonies love it. I mean it's a kind of you have to be quite open generally fairly open or learn to be open but I think it appeals to people who are.

impro and madness
being open

Lucy: But there's also some really like anal kind of like Duncan [Walsh-Atkins] our MD is very like this is the way it is and he's such a talented player

Pippa: very mathematical

Lucy: yes very mathematical and so is Dylan in a way you get those kind of maths-y brain people who actually feel really liberated by improvisation because/

impro freeing from structure and order
autism

Ruth: They can apply their rules but still be free within that

freedom to play within rule strutcure

Lucy: yeah it unlocks things and I think that people are really afraid of it but I think once they trust in it it just opens up this feeling. In Edinburgh Duncan was going off to have a baby and he broke down and cried he said 'I just love you guys so much I've got so much respect for you' and he never does that kind of thing and I think impro just has this way of uniting a group of people for a moment and that's so beautiful.

opening

community bonds

uniting communities

Ruth: I mean if you look at Showstopper as an example that's a really disparate group of people if you if you looked at us you know if you didn't know that it was Showstoppers you know they're not necessarily people who would hang out of get on. I mean like Shawn lives with

bringing people together community

me he's my lodger at the moment and er he's not paying me any rent Mr. Taxman (!) er and he um he and I on paper should not get on at all I mean he's/

Lucy: He's another one whose like…

Ruth: he's bordering on the autistic. I mean he's there's something about Shawn that loves facts — autism

Lucy: he loves facts!

Ruth: He knows things and he just knows stuff and on paper we should not get on at all and we just have this hilarious er quazi marriage relationship were you know we've worked out how to live with each other how to work with each other how to and and its brilliant its great. And you know whatever it is that we all have in common because we are very different about whatever it is that we all have in common is the thing that makes us do this and I think the thing that makes us do this is that we are all perfectionists in our own way we are all driven in our own way to create some thing different and exciting and we are all playing. And I think that's what it is. Essentially none of us like not to play and you find yourself doing it in day to day life. — commonality making connections; playful co-creation

Lucy: We've given up so much, we've sacrificed a lot for Showstopper and er you know you can get offered paid stuff and you go 'oh'/ — economical unviability of impro; impro/mainstream theatre

Ruth: 'oh no I'll have to miss two shows' — preferring impro

Lucy: and and like recently I did a day on Doctors and Ruth did as well and I was so excited because I hadn't filmed anything in ages and I got there and they're all quite polite and they're as polite as they are but they get so many people coming in that you really don't matter you're just a commodity you just deliver the lines do it first take because they just haven't got time for it and there's nothing I can see creative about. Whereas some guy after our Bath gig came up to us and said 'this — commodification of actors in mainstream industry

is the definition of creativity what you've just done tonight' and it *was* a really good show but erm generally that loving feeling of taking what the audience want us to do at that moment accepting it and building on it.	creativity communion with the audience
Ruth: its communion	communion
Lucy: It's like a religion I think because everyone needs that communion in their life.	religious language to describe impro
Pippa: Because everyone hates talking to improvisers if improvisers start talking about or waxing lyrical about impro cos you sound like a religious nut. 'Oh its really great because we all get along and sometimes we just know what each other is thinking	passion for impro communion
Ruth: you look at that first week in Edinburgh this year and that really was like being in some kind of weird cult. The six of us that were there for some reason in that week just understood each other there was no discussion like literally no discussion backstage. Like sometimes backstage we'll be going what was your [character's name] but in that there was none of that there was nothing and it was like er an evangelical experience you got on stage everyone knew where everyone else was going there was no bumping into each other it was like some kind of amazing and you came off just going… and the audience got it as well you know our first show they were on their feet before we'd even started I mean in was bizarre. There was something magic there is something magical about it and when it works, when it's like that there is nothing that can beat it and you do walk around like a complete [inaudible] and a complete lunatic about it and you're so obsessed with it I mean it is I would say an obsession	mystical/religious language to describe impro evangelical flow magic passion for impro bordering on madness
Amanda: This is making a massive assumption here but erm you know Showstopper seems to be the most	

commercially successful thing in the UK at the moment in terms of improvisation but do you feel like its not financially good for you guys as individuals.

financial 'otherness' of impro

Pippa: We get paid per show we do get paid but if you actually factored as much time as we're actually givng everyone gives up every Sunday a journey to a show can take up to 11 hours of your day because you've got to drive there and back. You're also spending a lot of time/ we make sure we all watch musicals every week. I get to rehearsals early so I can set the room up so we don't have any faffing you know so if you factor all that in you probably spend about twenty-four hours a week on it.

commitment beyond the show

Ruth: and spending time thinking about it

Pippa: So if you think about it like that for twenty-four hours you get fifty pounds.

Amanda: Right. Yes. So there are other things in your lives that probably give you more financially but/

Ruth: but nothing as spiritual and I think also that there's the thing about Showstopper that whether it is commercially the most successful or or and I think at the moment it seems to be one of the things that's taken off and that's brilliant but there's something er there's something special about Showstopper I think beyond that in that its er we've talked about this recently like it's a group of people who when we met none of us none of us really knew each other. I knew Pippa and I knew Dylan when I first walked into that workshop and I just assumed that everybody else knew each other which isn't necessarily the case and I walked in and it was weird cos when Dylan rang me he said if you get lost or anything you just need to give Adam a ring and this is his number and you know like you said you had a flash forwards when you went to Middlesex I

religious language to describe impro at odds with commodified norm of capitalist consumption

specialness of experience of impro communion

feelings of community even before meeting

had this thing where I went 'Oh I like him, Adam, oh I like him, great' and I'd never met him and I'd never seen his face but I heard his name and the number of his phone and I went 'oh yeah I like him' and I walked in and I did and there was something about the group that met there was some kind of weird I don't know how, you can't teach it but it was just kind of chemistry that happened.

communal chemistry

Lucy: I don't think we did meet I think we *were* put together by impro gods

religious language

Ruth: yeah impro gods

Lucy: we talk about impro gods

Pippa: we do

Ruth: I think there is definitely a connection between us that you can't teach, you can't it you can't make it up you can't fake it its just a thing that happened. Part of the thing that happened is that we all er loved the project pretty much from the get go

communal connection between players

genuine, real

passion for impro

Lucy: we were all afraid of it but we kept pursuing it

fear but doing it anyway

Ruth: we were all afraid of it but we all learnt and we all loved it but I think the other thing is for some reason there was just some kind of chemical thing that made us all click and gel and understand each other and understand what we were doing so for me the success and the wonder of Showstopper particularly is that, whatever that intangible thing is that we lucked out on. I mean there's no I mean put a different person in the mix at the beginning and it might not have happened or you know just you know it might not have happened anyway but it did and that's the magic of it

community

something intangible in the mix

magic

Pippa: I don't think any one does anything arty for money I mean I was three years on the stand-up circuit before I got paid kind of something that

creativity

resembled a decent amount of money so you know I don't think that's ever actually been a real issue for us. I mean now I do proper stand-up and it does pay my rent so I/ that is a problem for because I have to go 'oh I have to miss some of these gigs so I can pay my rent' but I'll only ever miss as few as possible as long as I can sort it out

economics at odds with norms of performance

Ruth: but I think all of us would give up everything else if Showstopper paid, paid the rent! Not made money just paid the rent.

would only do impro if financially sustainable

[inaudible chatter]

Ruth: but I think all of us would give up everything – I would, I wouldn't do anything else I mean apart from..

passion

Pippa: be great if we could have the Showstopper theatre where we rehearse all day and do shows at night – it would be like a commune.

physical building for impro, a dream

Amanda: I said to Cariad and the others as well: If I ever win the lottery I would open the impro home

Lucy: that's what we want to do, yeah

Ruth: every now and then I look at places and go 'that would be a good one'

Amanda: because you go to places like Australia and Canada and this is what Cariad and everyone were saying last week that their theory is because they have those dedicated theatre and spaces for impro that that is why it is respected

dedicated impro theatre creates recognition for the form

Ruth: we're getting there, we'll get one

Pippa: because over here really the only people people have really heard of is the Comedy Store Players and that's only because of Whose Line is it Anyway

impro as marginal

Lucy: and even in interviews in radio interviews its like 'so it's like 'Whose Line is it Anyway?'

whose line...

Ruth: cos its really nothing like that and even comparing it to the old impro musical its very different cos I've seen um, cos Alan is reinstating the impro musical in Canada and if you go on his facebook there's a video of it and it's very different

development of impro beyond the old recognisable tropes

Pippa: Its really interesting watching it because it's a three man thing and its very much in that Whose Line style. Because Showstopper always tries to be a proper musical like if someone were to walk in they'd be like is this? what is this? Oh it's a musical about bears okay. Whereas their one was much more kind of 'hey here's a song about cats. Dee dee de'

narrative as opposed to sketch show longform/shortform

Ruth; cos we're trying to find emotional change and emotional journeys and we're really trying to do a proper/ the ultimate aim of Showstopper is to improvise a perfect musical that if you recorded it and wrote the script from what we had said and what we had done you could have a West End musical. That would be a West End musical that's good enough to go out and I think from time to time we reach I'm not going to say we reach that but we reach near you know as close to perfection as you can get and we have moments of were we're like 'oh my God' like last night er Adam sang this incredible song. I mean it was so classy it was so classy and er it came out of were the story had gone and where everyone else had pushed him and it was so earned and it was so brilliant and you do go, that is you know, that could be/

narrative

creating something perfect playfully and together in the moment that is as good as mainstream theatre or better

Pippa: that's like that show we did. We did one in Greenwich and it was set in the observatory which was a brilliant setting because everyone, the audience all knew what it was and it was relevant to the area and er Ruth was the nanny to Lucy, Adam was the father and er there was, it became obvious that there was something here that wasn't possible because he was still in love with his dead wife [inaudible] but Ruth

spontaneous joyful co-creation

left the stage and Adam just turned and went [singing] 'why does my heart feel so good?' and it was just amazing that he just went into this song that felt that's exactly what would have happened in this musical it was amazing.

Lucy: but that show…when you're doing a show that is really in tune with everyone in the cast with everyone in the audience and with the Gods it kind of/ you don't really remember it you're just like a chan- no a funnel, no a vessel. You're like a vessel for creativity and it's really a spooky feeling.

religious language to describe impro

creativity

mystical/magical

Appendix Five – Memoing Notes from Ruth, Pippa and Lucy's Interview

1. Impro is set as apart from mainstream theatre. Observed by mainstream theatre and comedy as poor cousin. Observed by improvisers as superior (for many reasons). Perhaps not superior but certainly different, unique.
2. They see impro as a means in itself not a means to an end or a devising tool.
3. They, although experiencing both short and long form, find long form more conducive to emotional truth, character and narrative development and more conducive to female improvisers style of improvising.
4. They feel short form impro encourages gagging, is often comedic and suits male improvisers better.
5. They have experienced men as seeking limelight and wanting to shine in impro (esp. short form) and women as being more cooperative, supportive and less demanding of centre stage in impro and long form allows for this different way of improvising.
6. Both Ruth and Lucy threw themselves into improvising after experiencing relationships with men where they felt their creativity was being shut down.
7. They all felt frightened of impro but felt that fear and did it anyway. All in at the deep end. Have all gained a confidence through improvising, both professionally as actors and in their private lives.
8. The discovery of the principle of 'yes and' seems to be fundamental to all three women.
9. They love improvisation and if it paid a basic living wage would give up all else to do it. They would eat, sleep and breathe it if they could. They feel it as a calling. Like a cult/ religion.
10. The element of play and playfulness is very important to these three improvisers.
11. They have all encountered a lessening of the ego in favour of communal creation.
12. The sense of community is very, very important:

    Community with the group
    The wider impro community
    Their audiences
    The wider world that they encounter as individuals
    Communal creation
    Difference in community

13. Their experiences of Improvathons have been very significant.
14. Characters' and players' emotional truths and vulnerabilities – a sense of improvisers needing to be very open people and slightly mad. Dark material can emerge.
15. Being a helpful improviser is more important to them than being a good improviser.
16. Commitment to developing as an improviser through practice.
17. Ken Campbell – hugely influential figure to all three women.
18. They express the notion that impro has rules that enable freedom. They express that the male improvisers they know are quite mathematically/logically minded and these men relish the creative freedom impro allows them.

19. Trust – then players can fail and not mind – fail happily.
20. Serendipity – spooky things happen by chance when improvising – magic – the Gods of impro – muses – channelling.
21. Working together in complicity/communion creatively [the definition of creative]
22. Being changed, being affected on stage.
23. Being in the moment, being in flow, awareness – complicity.
24. Especially in Improvathon reality and the play space beginning to merge so the emotions are real, not acted.
25. Discussion of the economics of impro – does not pay but unlike acting they do not feel like a commodity – autonomy but in community. Process not product.
26. They think good impro is better than legitimate theatre. Though within the canon it is considered a low art.
27. They all felt their upbringings made them improvisers/open enough/brave enough.
28. They love the ephemeral, throwaway nature of impro.
29. Ideas around gender and impro:

    The women enjoy playing supporting roles.
    Women in impro have limited character choices
    Roles are gendered because of narrativity
    They do play cross gender but have to fight for it
    Fighting against playing female stereotypes
    As women they have to consciously take up more space and time on stage in order not to be interrupted
    Women and men use comedy in different ways for different purposes.

Appendix Six – Themes Emerging From Memoing of All Interviews

No.	Theme	Notes
1	Hegemony	Found in all except self-interview, perhaps because I have never been involved in mainstream 'legitimate' theatre. All other interviewees speak of impro as 'other' to hegemonic theatre, TV and comedy and the economy.
2	Ken Campbell and Keith Johnstone	Highly influential figures to all the interviewees (one or the other figure, or both). Both figures are 'agent provocateurs' at odds with mainstream theatre hegemony.
3	Passion	All value their practice of impro highly, despite (because of?) its marginal position.
4	Fear	All articulate issues around having fear of improvising and losing fear of improvising as become de-individuated into the group. Risk-taking an important component of the playing.
5	Communal creativity	Ideas around ego and loss of ego as engage with c-creation. Generation of good feeling in group, well-being. Group mind. Group nurture.
6	Inspiring your partner	One of the principles of impro - give your partner a good time. Find out how your partner likes to play. Communal play.
7	Gender/women as other	Playing across gender identities (allowed?) women taking time and space onstage (allowed?) male playing different/mixed/all women
8	The now Liminal space	listening, eye contact, being present, not planning, openness, the moment of co-creation - magical time and space, transgressive, no time to protect the ego in the now creation - de-individuation. The improvathon.
9	Playing	Failing happily, freedom, flexibility, fluidity, making bold choices. Competitive formats as vehicle for play, making bold character and story choices, giving partner what they want. The game of the scene. Saying yes, yes-anding.
10	Ego	Being a good improviser, being changed, ego protection and avoiding being changed, being helpful to a scene, trusting your obvious, being average not trying to be the best, shine, be the star.
11	Disposable	not like mainstream theatre, throwaway, can't get it wrong, only regret what you didn't do, ephemeral, fail happily.

No.	Theme	Notes
12	Binaries	process/product, form/content, chaos/order
13	Religious terms	many religious terms used to describe impro OR magical, mystical terms: impro gods, channel, vessel, like a cult, evangelical about it, meant to be, communion
14	Impro and life	creates flexible thinkers, playful people, living in the now OR do these types get attracted to practice impro